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THE LAST TURNING

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS.

AN EVERY-DAY STORY.

BY

MRS. GASKELL.

WITH EIGHTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE DU MAURIER.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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[*By the Editor of the "Cornhill Magazine."*]

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WIVES AND DAUGHTERS.

AN EVERY-DAY STORY.

CHAPTER I.

OLD WAYS AND NEW WAYS.

Mr. Preston was now installed in his new house at Hollingford; Mr. Sheepshanks having entered into dignified idleness at the house of his married daughter, who lived in the county town. His successor had plunged with energy into all manner of improvements; and among others, he fell to draining a piece of outlying waste and unreclaimed land of Lord Cumnor's, which was close to Squire Hamley's property; that very piece for which he had had the Government grant, but which now lay neglected, and only half-drained, with stacks of mossy tiles, and lines of up-turned furrows telling of abortive plans. It was not often that the squire rode in this direction now-a-days; but the cottage of a man who had been the squire's gamekeeper in those more prosperous days when the Hamleys could afford to preserve, was close to the rush-grown ground. This old servant and tenant was ill, and had sent a message up to the Hall, asking to see the squire; not to reveal any secret, or to say anything particular, but only from the feudal loyalty, which made it seem to the dying man as if it would be a comfort to shake the hand, and look once more into the eyes of the lord and master whom he had served, and whose ancestors his own forbears had served for so many generations. And the squire was as fully alive as old Silas to the claims of the tie that existed between them. Though he hated the thought, and still more, should hate the sight of the piece of land, on the side of which Silas's cottage

stood, the squire ordered his horse, and rode off within half-an-hour of receiving the message. As he drew near the spot he thought he heard the sound of tools, and the hum of many voices, just as he used to hear them once a year or two before. He listened with surprise. Yes. Instead of the still solitude he had expected, there was the clink of iron, the heavy gradual thud of the fall of barrows-ful of soil—the cry and shout of labourers. But not on his land—better worth expense and trouble by far than the reedy clay common on which the men were, in fact, employed. He knew it was Lord Cumnor's property; and he knew Lord Cumnor and his family had gone up in the world ("the Whig rascals!"), both in wealth and in station, as the Hamleys had gone down. But all the same—in spite of long known facts, and in spite of reason—the squire's ready anger rose high at the sight of his neighbour doing what he had been unable to do, and he a Whig, and his family only in the county since Queen Anne's time. He went so far as to wonder whether they might not—the labourers he meant—avail themselves of his tiles, lying so conveniently close to hand. All these thoughts, regrets, and wonders were in his mind as he rode up to the cottage he was bound to, and gave his horse in charge to a little lad, who had hitherto found his morning's business and amusement in playing at "houses" with a still younger sister, with some of the squire's neglected tiles. But he was old Silas's grandson, and he might have battered the rude red earthenware to pieces—a whole stack—one by one, and the squire would have said little or nothing. It was only that he would not spare one to a labourer of Lord Cumnor's. No! not one.

Old Silas lay in a sort of closet, opening out of the family-living room. The small window that gave it light looked right on to the "moor," as it was called; and by day the check curtain was drawn aside so that he might watch the progress of the labour. Everything about the old man was clean, of course; and, with Death, the leveller, so close at hand, it was the labourer who made the first advances, and put out his horny hand to the squire.

"I thought you'd come, squire. Your father came for to see my father as he lay a-dying."

"Come, come, my man!" said the squire, easily affected, as he always was. "Don't talk of dying, we shall soon have you out, never fear. They've sent you up some soup from the Hall, as I bade 'em, haven't they?"

"Ay, ay, I've had all as I could want for to eat and to drink. The young squire and Master Roger was here yesterday."

"Yes, I know."

"But I'm a deal nearer Heaven to-day, I am. I should like you to look after th' covers in th' West Spinney, squire; them gorse, you know, where th' old fox had her hole—her as give 'em so many a run. You'll mind it, squire, though you was but a lad. I could laugh to think on her tricks yet." And, with a weak attempt at a laugh, he got himself into a violent fit of coughing, which alarmed the squire, who thought he would never get his breath again. His daughter-in-law came in at the sound, and told the squire that he had these coughing-bouts very frequently, and that she thought he would go off in one of them before long. This opinion of hers was spoken simply out before the old man, who now lay gasping and exhausted upon his pillow. Poor people acknowledge the inevitableness and the approach of death in a much more straightforward manner than is customary among more educated folk. The squire was shocked at her hard-heartedness, as he considered it; but the old man himself had received much tender kindness from his daughter-in-law; and what she had just said was no more news to him than the fact that the sun would rise to-morrow. He was more anxious to go on with his story.

"Them navvies—I call 'em navvies because some on 'em is strangers, though some on 'em is th' men as was turned off your own works, squire, when there came orders to stop 'em last fall—they're a-pulling up gorse and brush to light their fire for warming up their messes. It's a long way off to their homes, and they mostly dine here; and there'll be nothing of a cover left, if you don't see after 'em. I thought I should like to tell ye afore I died. Parson's been here; but I did na tell him. He's all for the earl's folk, and he'd not ha' heeded. It's the earl as put him into his church, I reckon, for he said what a fine thing it were for to see so much employment a-given to the poor, and he never said nought o' th' sort when your works were agait, squire."

This long speech had been interrupted by many a cough and gasp for breath; and having delivered himself of what was on his mind, he turned his face to the wall, and appeared to be going to sleep. Presently he roused himself with a start.

"I know I flogged him well, I did. But he were after pheasants' eggs, and I didn't know he were an orphan. Lord, forgive me!"

"He's thinking on David Morton, the cripple, as used to go about trapping venison," whispered the woman.

"Why, he died long ago—twenty year, I should think," replied the squire.

"Ay, but when grandfather goes off i' this way to sleep after a bout of talking he seems to be dreaming on old times. He'll not waken up yet, sir; you'd best sit down if you'd like to stay," she continued, as she went into the houseplace and dusted a chair with her apron. "He was very particular in bidding me wake him if he were asleep, and you or Mr. Roger was to call. Mr. Roger said he'd be coming again this morning—but he'll likely sleep an hour or more, if he's let alone."

"I wish I'd said good-by, I should like to have done that."

"He drops off so sudden," said the woman. "But if you'd be better pleased to have said it, squire, I'll waken him up a bit."

"No, no!" the squire called out as the woman was going to be as good as her word. "I'll come again, perhaps to-morrow. And tell him I was sorry; for I am indeed. And be sure and send to the Hall for anything you want! Mr. Roger is coming, is he? He'll bring me word how he is, later on. I should like to have bidden him good-by."

So, giving sixpence to the child who had held his horse, the squire mounted. He sate still a moment, looking at the busy work going on before him, and then at his own half-completed drainage. It was a bitter pill. He had objected to borrowing from Government, in the first instance; and then his wife had persuaded him to the step; and after it was once taken, he was as proud as could be of the only concession to the spirit of progress he ever made in his life. He had read and studied the subject pretty thoroughly, if also very slowly, during the time his wife had been influencing him. He was tolerably well up in agriculture, if in nothing else; and at one time he had taken the lead among the neighbouring landowners, when he first began tile-drainage. In those days people used to speak of Squire Hamley's hobby; and at market ordinaries, or county dinners, they rather dreaded setting him off on long repetitions of arguments from the different pamphlets on the subject which he had read. And now the proprietors all around him were draining—draining; his interest to Government was running on all the same, though his works were stopped, and his tiles deteriorating in value. It was not a soothing consideration, and the squire was almost ready

to quarrel with his shadow. He wanted a vent for his ill-humour; and suddenly remembering the devastations on his covers, which he had heard about not a quarter of an hour before, he rode up to the men busy at work on Lord Cumnor's land. Just before he got up to them he encountered Mr. Preston, also on horseback, come to overlook his labourers. The squire did not know him, personally, but from the agent's manner of speaking, and the deference that was evidently paid to him, Mr. Hamley saw that he was a responsible person. So he addressed the agent:—"I beg your pardon, I suppose you are the manager of these works?"

Mr. Preston replied,—"Certainly. I am that and many other things besides, at your service. I have succeeded Mr. Sheepshanks in the management of my lord's property. Mr. Hamley of Hamley, I believe?"

The squire bowed stiffly. He did not like his name to be asked or presumed upon in that manner. An equal might conjecture who he was, or recognize him, but, till he announced himself, an inferior had no right to do more than address him respectfully as "sir." That was the squire's code of etiquette.

"I am Mr. Hamley of Hamley. I suppose you are as yet ignorant of the boundary of Lord Cumnor's land, and so I will inform you that my property begins at the pond yonder—just where you see the rise in the ground."

"I am perfectly acquainted with that fact, Mr. Hamley," said Mr. Preston, a little annoyed at the ignorance attributed to him. "But may I inquire why my attention is called to it just now?"

The squire was beginning to boil over; but he tried to keep his temper in. The effort was very much to be respected, for it was a great one. There was something in the handsome and well-dressed agent's tone and manner inexpressibly irritating to the squire, and it was not lessened by an involuntary comparison of the capital roadster on which Mr. Preston was mounted with his own ill-groomed and aged cob.

"I have been told that your men out yonder do not respect these boundaries, but are in the habit of plucking up gorse from my covers to light their fires."

"It is possible they may!" said Mr. Preston, lifting his eyebrows, his manner being more nonchalant than his words. "I daresay they think no great harm of it. However, I'll inquire."

"Do you doubt my word, sir?" said the squire, fretting his

mare till she began to dance about. "I tell you I've heard it only within this last half-hour."

"I don't mean to doubt your word, Mr. Hamley; it's the last thing I should think of doing. But you must excuse my saying that the argument which you have twice brought up for the authenticity of your statement, 'that you have heard it within the last half-hour,' is not quite so forcible as to preclude the possibility of a mistake."

"I wish you'd only say in plain language that you doubt my word," said the squire, clenching and slightly raising his horse-whip. "I can't make out what you mean—you use so many words."

"Pray don't lose your temper, sir. I said I should inquire. You have not seen the men pulling up gorse yourself, or you would have named it. I, surely, may doubt the correctness of your information until I have made some inquiry; at any rate, that is the course I shall pursue, and if it gives you offence, I shall be sorry, but I shall do it just the same. When I am convinced that harm has been done to your property, I shall take steps to prevent it for the future, and of course, in my lord's name, I shall pay you compensation—it may probably amount to half-a-crown." He added these last words in a lower tone, as if to himself, with a slight contemptuous smile on his face.

"Quiet, mare, quiet," said the squire, quite unaware that he was the cause of her impatient movements by the way he was perpetually tightening her reins; and also, perhaps, he unconsciously addressed the injunction to himself.

Neither of them saw Roger Hamley, who was approaching them with long, steady steps. He had seen his father from the door of old Silas's cottage, and, as the poor fellow was still asleep, he was coming to speak to his father, and was near enough now to hear the next words.

"I don't know who you are, but I've known land-agents who were gentlemen, and I've known some who were not. You belong to this last set, young man," said the squire, "that you do. I should like to try my horsewhip on you for your insolence."

"Pray, Mr. Hamley," replied Mr. Preston, coolly, "curb your temper a little, and reflect. I really feel sorry to see a man of your age in such a passion:"—moving a little farther off, however, but really more with a desire to save the irritated man from carrying

The Burning of the Gorse

his threat into execution, out of a dislike to the slander and excitement it would cause, than from any personal dread. Just at this moment Roger Hamley came close up. He was panting a little, and his eyes were very stern and dark; but he spoke quietly enough.

"Mr. Preston, I can hardly understand what you mean by your last words. But, remember, my father is a gentleman of age and position, and not accustomed to receive advice as to the management of his temper from young men like you."

"I desired him to keep his men off my land," said the squire to his son—his wish to stand well in Roger's opinion restraining his temper a little; but though his words might be a little calmer, there were all other signs of passion present—the discoloured complexion, the trembling hands, the fiery cloud in his eyes. "He refused, and doubted my word."

Mr. Preston turned to Roger, as if appealing from Philip drunk to Philip sober, and spoke in a tone of cool explanation, which, though not insolent in words, was excessively irritating in manner.

"Your father has misunderstood me—perhaps it is no wonder," trying to convey, by a look of intelligence at the son, his opinion that the father was in no state to hear reason. "I never refused to do what was just and right. I only required further evidence as to the past wrong-doing; your father took offence at this," and then he shrugged his shoulders, and lifted his eyebrows in a manner he had formerly learnt in France.

"At any rate, sir! I can scarcely reconcile the manner and words to my father, which I heard you use when I first came up, with the deference you ought to have shown to a man of his age and position. As to the fact of the trespass——"

"They are pulling up all the gorse, Roger—there'll be no cover whatever for game soon," put in the squire.

Roger bowed to his father, but took up his speech at the point it was at before the interruption.

"I will inquire into it myself at a cooler moment; and if I find that such trespass or damage has been committed, of course I shall expect that you will see it put a stop to. Come, father! I am going to see old Silas—perhaps you don't know that he is very ill." So he endeavoured to wile the squire away to prevent further words. He was not entirely successful.

Mr. Preston was enraged by Roger's calm and dignified manner,

and threw after them this parting shaft, in the shape of a loud soliloquy,—

"Position, indeed! What are we to think of the position of a man who begins works like these without counting the cost, and comes to a stand-still, and has to turn off his labourers just at the beginning of winter, leaving——"

They were too far off to hear the rest. The squire was on the point of turning back before this, but Roger took hold of the reins of the old mare, and led her over some of the boggy ground, as if to guide her into sure footing, but, in reality, because he was determined to prevent the renewal of the quarrel. It was well that the cob knew him, and was, indeed, old enough to prefer quietness to dancing; for Mr. Hamley plucked hard at the reins, and at last broke out with an oath,—"Damn it, Roger! I'm not a child; I won't be treated as such. Leave go I say!"

Roger let go; they were now on firm ground, and he did not wish any watchers to think that he was exercising any constraint over his father; and this quiet obedience to his impatient commands did more to soothe the squire than anything else could have effected just then.

"I know I turned them off—what could I do? I'd no more money for their weekly wages; it's a loss to me, as you know. He doesn't know, no one knows, but I think your mother would, how it cut me to turn 'em off just before winter set in. I lay awake many a night thinking of it, and I gave them what I had—I did, indeed. I hadn't got money to pay 'em, but I had three barren cows fattened, and gave every scrap of meat to the men, and I let 'em go into the woods and gather what was fallen, and I winked at their breaking off old branches, and now to have it cast up against me by that cur—that servant. But I'll go on with the works, by ——, I will, if only to spite him. I'll show him who I am. My position, indeed! A Hamley of Hamley takes a higher position than his master. I'll go on with the works, see if I don't! I'm paying between one and two hundred a year interest on Government money. I'll raise some more if I go to the Jews; Osborne has shown me the way, and Osborne shall pay for it—he shall. I'll not put up with insults. You shouldn't have stopped me, Roger! I wish to heaven I'd horsewhipped the fellow!"

He was lashing himself again into an impotent rage, painful to a son to witness; but just then the little grandchild of old Silas, who

had held the squire's horse during his visit to the sick man, came running up, breathless :

"Please, sir, please, squire, mammy has sent me; grandfather has wakened up sudden, and mammy says he's dying, and would you please come ; she says he'd take it as a kind compliment, she's sure."

So they went to the cottage, the squire speaking never a word, but suddenly feeling as if lifted out of a whirlwind and set down in a still and awful place.

CHAPTER II.

A PASSIVE COQUETTE.

It is not to be supposed that such an encounter as Mr. Preston had just had with Roger Hamley sweetened the regards in which the two young men henceforward held each other. They had barely spoken to one another before, and but seldom met; for the land-agent's employment had hitherto lain at Ashcombe, some sixteen or seventeen miles from Hamley. He was older than Roger by several years; but during the time he had lived in the country Osborne and Roger had been at school and at college. Mr. Preston was prepared to dislike the Hamleys for many unreasonable reasons. Cynthia and Molly had both spoken of the brothers with familiar regard, implying considerable intimacy; their flowers had been preferred to his on the occasion of the ball; most people spoke well of them; and Mr. Preston had an animal's instinctive jealousy and combativeness against all popular young men. Their "position"—poor as the Hamleys might be—was far higher than his own in the county; and, moreover, he was agent to the great Whig lord, whose political interests were diametrically opposed to those of the old Tory squire. Not that Lord Cumnor troubled himself much about his political interests. His family had obtained property and title from the Whigs at the time of the Hanoverian succession; and so, traditionally, he was a Whig, and had belonged in his youth to Whig clubs, where he had lost considerable sums of money to Whig gamblers. All this was satisfactory and consistent enough. And if Lord Hollingford had not been returned for the county on the Whig interest—as his father had been before him, until he had succeeded to the title—it is quite probable Lord Cumnor would have considered the British constitution in danger, and the patriotism of his ancestors ungratefully ignored. But, excepting at elections, he had

no notion of making Whig and Tory a party cry. He had lived too much in London, and was of too sociable a nature, to exclude any man who jumped with his humour from the hospitality he was always ready to offer, be the agreeable acquaintance Whig, Tory, or Radical. But in the county of which he was lord-lieutenant, the old party distinction was still a shibboleth by which men were tested for their fitness for social intercourse, as well as on the hustings. If by any chance a Whig found himself at a Tory dinner-table—or vice versâ—the food was hard of digestion, and wine and viands were criticized rather than enjoyed. A marriage between the young people of the separate parties was almost as unheard-of and prohibited an alliance as that of Romeo and Juliet's. And of course Mr. Preston was not a man in whose breast such prejudices would die away. They were an excitement to him for one thing, and called out all his talent for intrigue on behalf of the party to which he was allied. Moreover, he considered it as loyalty to his employer to "scatter his enemies" by any means in his power. He had always hated and despised the Tories in general; and after that interview on the marshy common in front of Silas's cottage, he hated the Hamleys and Roger especially, with a very choice and particular hatred. "That prig," as hereafter he always designated Roger—"he shall pay for it yet," he said to himself by way of consolation, after the father and son had left him. "What a lout it is!"—watching the receding figures. "The old chap has twice as much spunk," as the squire tugged at his bridle reins. "The old mare could make her way better without being led, my fine fellow. But I see through your dodge. You're afraid of your old father turning back and getting into another rage. Position indeed! a beggarly squire—a man who did turn off his men just before winter, to rot or starve, for all he cared—it's just like a venal old Tory." And, under the cover of sympathy with the dismissed labourers, Mr. Preston indulged his own private pique very pleasantly.

Mr. Preston had many causes for rejoicing: he might have forgotten this discomfiture as he chose to feel it, in the remembrance of an increase of income, and in the popularity he enjoyed in his new abode. All Hollingford came forwards to do the earl's new agent honour. Mr. Sheepshanks had been a crabbed, crusty old bachelor, frequenting inn-parlours on market days, not unwilling to give dinners to three or four chosen friends and familiars, with

whom, in return, he dined from time to time, and with whom, also, he kept up an amicable rivalry in the matter of wines. But he "did not appreciate female society," as Miss Browning elegantly worded his unwillingness to accept the invitations of the Hollingford ladies. He was unrefined enough to speak of these invitations to his intimate friends aforesaid in the following manner, "Those old women's worrying," but, of course, they never heard of this. Little quarter-of-sheet notes, without any envelopes—that invention was unknown in those days—but sealed in the corners when folded up instead of gummed as they are fastened at present, occasionally passed between Mr. Sheepshanks and the Miss Brownings, Mrs. Goodenough or others. From the first of these ladies the form ran as follows :—"Miss Browning and her sister, Miss Phœbe Browning, present their respectful compliments to Mr. Sheepshanks, and beg to inform him that a few friends have kindly consented to favour them with their company at tea on Thursday next. Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe will take it very kindly if Mr. Sheepshanks will join their little circle."

Now for Mrs. Goodenough.

"Mrs. Goodenough's respects to Mr. Sheepshanks, and hopes he is in good health. She would be very glad if he would favour her with his company to tea on Monday. My daughter, in Combermere, has sent me a couple of guinea-fowls, and Mrs. Goodenough hopes Mr. Sheepshanks will stay and take a bit of supper."

No need for the dates of the days of the month. The good ladies would have thought that the world was coming to an end if the invitation had been sent out a week before the party therein named. But not even guinea-fowls for supper could tempt Mr. Sheepshanks. He remembered the made-wines he had tasted in former days at Hollingford parties, and shuddered. Bread-and-cheese, with a glass of bitter-beer, or a little brandy-and-water, partaken of in his old clothes (which had worn into shapes of loose comfort, and smelt strongly of tobacco), he liked better than roast guinea-fowl and birch-wine, even without throwing into the balance the stiff uneasy coat, and the tight neckcloth and tighter shoes. So the ex-agent had been seldom, if ever, seen at the Hollingford tea-parties. He might have had his form of refusal stereotyped, it was so invariably the same.

"Mr. Sheepshanks' duty to Miss Browning and her sister" (to Mrs. Goodenough, or to others, as the case might be). "Business

of importance prevents him from availing himself of their polite invitation; for which he begs to return his best thanks."

But now that Mr. Preston had succeeded, and come to live in Hollingford, things were changed.

He accepted every civility right and left, and won golden opinions accordingly. Parties were made in his honour, "just as if he had been a bride," Miss Phœbe Browning said; and to all of them he went.

"What's the man after?" said Mr. Sheepshanks to himself, when he heard of his successor's affability, and sociability, and amiability, and a variety of other agreeable "ilities," from the friends whom the old steward still retained at Hollingford. "Preston's not a man to put himself out for nothing. He's deep. He'll be after something solider than popularity."

The sagacious old bachelor was right. Mr. Preston was "after" something more than mere popularity. He went wherever he had a chance of meeting Cynthia Kirkpatrick.

It might be that Molly's spirits were more depressed at this time than they were in general; or that Cynthia was exultant, unawares to herself, in the amount of attention and admiration she was receiving, from Roger by day, from Mr. Preston in the evening, but the two girls seemed to have parted company in cheerfulness. Molly was always gentle, but very grave and silent. Cynthia, on the contrary, was merry, full of pretty mockeries, and hardly ever silent. When first she came to Hollingford one of her great charms had been that she was such a gracious listener; now her excitement, by whatever caused, made her too restless to hold her tongue; yet what she said was too pretty, too witty, not to be a winning and sparkling interruption, eagerly welcomed by those who were under her sway. Mr. Gibson was the only one who observed this change, and reasoned upon it. "She's in a mental fever of some kind," thought he to himself. "She's very fascinating, but I don't quite understand her."

If Molly had not been so entirely loyal to her friend, she might have thought this constant brilliancy a little tiresome when brought into every-day life; it was not the sunshiny rest of a placid lake, it was rather the glitter of the pieces of a broken mirror, which confuses and bewilders. Cynthia would not talk quietly about anything now; subjects of thought or conversation seemed to have lost their relative value. There were exceptions to this mood of

hers, when she sank into deep fits of silence, that would have been gloomy had it not been for the never varying sweetness of her temper. If there was a little kindness to be done to either Mr. Gibson or Molly, Cynthia was just as ready as ever to do it; nor did she refuse to do anything her mother wished, however fidgety might be the humour that prompted the wish. But in this latter case Cynthia's eyes were not quickened by her heart.

Molly was dejected, she knew not why. Cynthia had drifted a little apart; that was not it. Her stepmother had whimsical moods; and if Cynthia displeased her, she would oppress Molly with small kindnesses and pseudo-affection. Or else everything was wrong, the world was out of joint, and Molly had failed in her mission to set it right, and was to be blamed accordingly. But Molly was of too steady a disposition to be much moved by the changeableness of an unreasonable person. She might be annoyed, or irritated, but she was not depressed. That was not it. The real cause was certainly this. As long as Roger was drawn to Cynthia, and sought her of his own accord, it had been a sore pain and bewilderment to Molly's heart; but it was a straightforward attraction, and one which Molly acknowledged, in her humility and great power of loving, to be the most natural thing in the world. She would look at Cynthia's beauty and grace, and feel as if no one could resist it. And when she witnessed all the small signs of honest devotion which Roger was at no pains to conceal, she thought, with a sigh, that surely no girl could help relinquishing her heart to such tender, strong keeping as Roger's character ensured. She would have been willing to cut off her right hand, if need were, to forward his attachment to Cynthia; and the self-sacrifice would have added a strange zest to a happy crisis. She was indignant at what she considered Mrs. Gibson's obtuseness to so much goodness and worth; and when she called Roger a "country lout," or any other depreciative epithet, Molly would pinch herself in order to keep silent. But after all, those were peaceful days compared to the present, when she, seeing the wrong side of the tapestry, after the wont of those who dwell in the same house with a plotter, became aware that Mrs. Gibson had totally changed her behaviour to Roger, from some cause unknown to Molly.

But he was always exactly the same; "steady as old Time," as Mrs. Gibson called him, with her usual originality; "a rock of strength, under whose very shadow there is rest," as Mrs. Hamley

had once spoken of him. So the cause of Mrs. Gibson's altered manner lay not in him. Yet now he was sure of a welcome, let him come at any hour he would. He was playfully reproved for having taken Mrs. Gibson's words too literally, and for never coming before lunch. But he said he considered her reasons for such words to be valid, and should respect them. And this was done out of his simplicity, and from no tinge of malice. Then in their family conversations at home, Mrs. Gibson was constantly making projects for throwing Roger and Cynthia together, with so evident a betrayal of her wish to bring about an engagement, that Molly chafed at the net spread so evidently, and at Roger's blindness in coming so willingly to be entrapped. She forgot his previous willingness, his former evidences of manly fondness for the beautiful Cynthia ; she only saw plots of which he was the victim, and Cynthia the conscious if passive bait. She felt as if she could not have acted as Cynthia did; no, not even to gain Roger's love. Cynthia heard and saw as much of the domestic background as she did, and yet she submitted to the rôle assigned to her! To be sure, this rôle would have been played by her unconsciously ; the things prescribed were what she would naturally have done ; but because they were prescribed—by implication only, it is true—Molly would have resisted; have gone out, for instance, when she was expected to stay at home; or have lingered in the garden when a long country walk was planned. At last—for she could not help loving Cynthia, come what would—she determined to believe that Cynthia was entirely unaware of all; but it was with an effort that she brought herself to believe it.

It may be all very pleasant "to sport with Amaryllis in the shade, or with the tangles of Neæra's hair," but young men at the outset of their independent life have many other cares in this prosaic England to occupy their time and their thoughts. Roger was fellow at Trinity, to be sure; and from the outside it certainly appeared as if his position, as long as he chose to keep unmarried, was a very easy one. His was not a nature, however, to sink down into inglorious ease, even had his fellowship income been at his disposal. He looked forward to an active life ; in what direction he had not yet determined. He knew what were his talents and his tastes; and did not wish the former to lie buried, nor the latter, which he regarded as gifts, fitting him for some peculiar work, to be disregarded or thwarted. He rather liked awaiting an object, secure in his own energy to force his way to it, when he once saw it clearly.

He reserved enough of money for his own personal needs, which were small, and for the ready furtherance of any project he might see fit to undertake; the rest of his income was Osborne's; given and accepted in the spirit which made the bond between these two brothers so rarely perfect. It was only the thought of Cynthia that threw Roger off his balance. A strong man in everything else, about her he was as a child. He knew that he could not marry and retain his fellowship; his intention was to hold himself loose from any employment or profession until he had found one to his mind, so there was no immediate prospect—no prospect for many years, indeed, that he would be able to marry. Yet he went on seeking Cynthia's sweet company, listening to the music of her voice, basking in her sunshine, and feeding his passion in every possible way, just like an unreasoning child. He knew that it was folly—and yet he did it; and it was perhaps this that made him so sympathetic with Osborne. Roger racked his brains about Osborne's affairs much more frequently than Osborne troubled himself. Indeed, he had become so ailing and languid of late, that even the squire made only very faint objections to his desire for frequent change of scene, though formerly he used to grumble so much at the necessary expenditure it involved.

"After all, it does not cost much," the squire said to Roger one day. "Choose how he does it, he does it cheaply; he used to come and ask me for twenty, where now he does it for five. But he and I have lost each other's language, that's what we have! and my dictionary" (only he called it "dixonary") "has all got wrong because of those confounded debts—which he will never explain to me, or talk about—he always holds me off at arm's length when I begin upon it—he does, Roger—me, his old dad, as was his primest favourite of all, when he was a little bit of a chap!"

The squire dwelt so much upon Osborne's reserved behaviour to himself, that brooding over this one subject perpetually he became more morose and gloomy than ever in his manner to his son, resenting the want of the confidence and affection that he thus repelled. So much so that Roger, who desired to avoid being made the receptacle of his father's complaints against Osborne—and Roger's passive listening was the sedative his father always sought—had often to have recourse to the discussion of the drainage works as a counter-irritant. The squire had felt Mr. Preston's speech about the dismissal of his workpeople very keenly; it fell in with the

reproaches of his own conscience, though, as he would repeat to Roger over and over again,—"I could not help it—how could I? —I was drained dry of ready money—I wish the land was drained as dry as I am," said he, with a touch of humour that came out before he was aware, and at which he smiled sadly enough. "What was I to do, I ask you, Roger? I know I was in a rage—I've had a deal to make me so—and maybe I did not think as much about consequences as I should have done, when I gave orders for 'em to be sent off; but I couldn't have done otherwise if I'd ha' thought for a twelvemonth in cool blood. Consequences! I hate consequences; they've always been against me; they have. I'm so tied up I can't cut down a stick more, and that's a 'consequence' of having the property so deucedly well settled; I wish I'd never had any ancestors. Ay, laugh, lad! it does me good to see thee laugh a bit, after Osborne's long face, which always grows longer at sight o' me!"

"Look here, father!" said Roger, suddenly, "I'll manage somehow about the money for the works. You trust to me; give me two months to turn myself in, and you shall have some money, at any rate, to begin with."

The squire looked at him, and his face brightened as a child's does at the promise of a pleasure made to him by some one on whom he can rely. He became a little graver, however, as he said, —"But how will you get it? It's hard enough work."

"Never mind; I'll get it—a hundred or so at first—I don't yet know how—but remember, father, I'm a senior wrangler, and a 'very promising young writer,' as that review called me. Oh, you don't know what a fine fellow you've got for a son. You should have read that review to know all my wonderful merits."

"I did, Roger. I heard Gibson speaking of it, and I made him get it for me. I should have understood it better if they could have called the animals by their English names, and not put so much of their French jingo into it."

"But it was an answer to an article by a French writer," pleaded Roger.

"I'd ha' let him alone!" said the squire, earnestly. "We had to beat 'em, and we did it at Waterloo; but I'd not demean myself by answering any of their lies, if I was you. But I got through the review, for all their Latin and French; I did, and if you doubt me, you just look at the end of the great ledger, turn it upside

down, and you'll find I've copied out all the fine words they said of you: 'careful observer,' 'strong nervous English,' 'rising philosopher.' Oh! I can nearly say it all off by heart, for many a time when I am frabbed by bad debts, or Osborne's bills, or moidered with accounts, I turn the ledger wrong way up, and smoke a pipe over it, while I read those pieces out of the review which speak about you, lad!"

CHAPTER III.

COMING EVENTS.

Roger had turned over many plans in his mind, by which he thought that he could obtain sufficient money for the purpose he desired to accomplish. His careful grandfather, who had been a merchant in the city, had so tied up the few thousands he had left to his daughter, that although, in case of her death before her husband's, the latter might enjoy the life-interest thereof, yet, in case of both their deaths, their second son did not succeed to the property till he was five-and-twenty; and if he died before that age, the money that would then have been his went to one of his cousins on the maternal side. In short, the old merchant had taken as many precautions about his legacy as if it had been for tens, instead of units of thousands. Of course Roger might have slipped through all these meshes by insuring his life until the specified age; and probably if he had consulted any lawyer this course would have been suggested to him. But he disliked taking any one into his confidence on the subject of his father's want of ready money. He had obtained a copy of his grandfather's will at Doctors' Commons, and he imagined that all the contingencies involved in it would be patent to the light of nature and common sense. He was a little mistaken in this, but not the less resolved that money in some way he would have in order to fulfil his promise to his father, and for the ulterior purpose of giving the squire some daily interest to distract his thoughts from the regrets and cares that were almost weakening his mind. It was "Roger Hamley, senior wrangler and fellow of Trinity to the highest bidder, no matter what honest employment," and presently it came down to "any bidder at all."

Another perplexity and distress at this time weighed upon Roger. Osborne, heir to the estate, was going to have a child.

The Hamley property was entailed on "heirs male born in lawful wedlock." Was the "wedlock" lawful? Osborne never seemed to doubt that it was—never seemed, in fact, to think twice about it. And if he, the husband, did not, how much less did Aimée, the trustful wife. Yet who could tell how much misery any shadows of illegality might cast into the future? One evening Roger, sitting by the languid, careless, dilettante Osborne, began to question him as to the details of the marriage. Osborne knew instinctively at what Roger was aiming. It was not that he did not desire perfect legality in justice to his wife; it was that he was so indisposed at the time that he hated to be bothered. It was something like the refrain of Gray's Scandinavian Prophetess: "Leave me, leave me to repose."

"But do try and tell me how you managed it."

"How tiresome you are, Roger!" put in Osborne.

"Well, I daresay I am. Go on!"

"I've told you Morrison married us. You remember old Morrison at Trinity?"

"Yes; as good and blunder-headed a fellow as ever lived."

"Well, he's taken orders; and the examination for priest's orders fatigued him so much that he got his father to give him a hundred or two for a tour on the Continent. He meant to get to Rome, because he heard that there were such pleasant winters there. So he turned up at Metz in August."

"I don't see why."

"No more did he. He never was great in geography, you know; and somehow he thought that Metz, pronounced French fashion, must be on the road to Rome. Some one had told him so in fun. However, it was very well for me that I met with him there, for I was determined to be married, and that without loss of time."

"But Aimée is a Catholic?"

"That's true! but you see I am not. You don't suppose I would do her any wrong, Roger?" asked Osborne, sitting up in his lounging-chair, and speaking rather indignantly to Roger, his face suddenly flushing red.

"No! I'm sure you would not mean it; but you see there's a child coming, and this estate is entailed on 'heirs-male.' Now, I want to know if the marriage is legal or not? and it seems to me it's a ticklish question."

"Oh!" said Osborne, falling back into repose, "if that's all, I suppose you're next heir-male, and I can trust you as I can myself. You know my marriage is *bonâ fide* in intention, and I believe it to be legal in fact. We went over to Strasbourg; Aimée picked up a friend—a good middle-aged Frenchwoman—who served half as bridesmaid, half as chaperone, and then we went before the mayor—préfet—what do you call them? I think Morrison rather enjoyed the spree. I signed all manner of papers in the prefecture; I did not read them over, for fear lest I could not sign them conscientiously. It was the safest plan. Aimée kept trembling so I thought she would faint; and then we went off to the nearest English chaplaincy, Carlsruhe, and the chaplain was away, so Morrison easily got the loan of the chapel, and we were married the next day."

"But surely some registration or certificate was necessary?"

"Morrison said he would undertake all those forms; and he ought to know his own business. I know I tipped him pretty well for the job."

"You must be married again," said Roger, after a pause, "and that before the child is born. Have you got a certificate of the marriage?"

"I daresay Morrison has got it somewhere. But I believe I'm legally married according to the laws both of England and France; I really do, old fellow. I've got the préfet's papers somewhere."

"Never mind! you shall be married again in England. Aimée goes to the Roman Catholic chapel at Prestham, doesn't she?"

"Yes. She is so good I wouldn't disturb her in her religion for the world."

"Then you shall be married both there and at the church of the parish in which she lives as well," said Roger, decidedly.

"It's a great deal of trouble, unnecessary trouble, and unnecessary expense, I should say," said Osborne. "Why can't you leave well alone? Neither Aimée nor I are of the sort of stuff to turn scoundrels and deny the legality of our marriage; and if the child is a boy and my father dies, and I die, why I'm sure you'll do him justice, as sure as I am of myself, old fellow!"

"But if I die into the bargain? Make a hecatomb of the present Hamleys all at once, while you are about it. Who succeeds as heir-male?"

Osborne thought for a moment. "One of the Irish Hamleys, I

suppose. I fancy they are needy chaps. Perhaps you're right. But what need to have such gloomy forebodings?"

"The law makes one have foresight in such affairs," said Roger. "So I'll go down to Aimée next week when I'm in town, and I'll make all necessary arrangements before you come. I think you'll be happier if it is all done."

"I shall be happier if I've a chance of seeing the little woman, that I grant you. But what is taking you up to town? I wish I'd money to run about like you, instead of being shut up for ever in this dull old house."

Osborne was apt occasionally to contrast his position with Roger's in a tone of complaint, forgetting that both were the results of character, and also that out of his income Roger gave up so large a portion for the maintenance of his brother's wife. But if this ungenerous thought of Osborne's had been set clearly before his conscience, he would have smote his breast and cried "Mea culpa" with the best of them; it was only that he was too indolent to keep an unassisted conscience.

"I shouldn't have thought of going up," said Roger, reddening as if he had been accused of spending another's money instead of his own, "if I hadn't had to go up on business. Lord Hollingford has written for me; he knows my great wish for employment, and has heard of something which he considers suitable; there's his letter if you care to read it. But it does not tell anything definitely."

Osborne read the letter and returned it to Roger. After a moment or two of silence he said,—"Why do you want money? Are we taking too much from you? It's a great shame of me; but what can I do? Only suggest a career for me, and I'll follow it to-morrow." He spoke as if Roger had been reproaching him.

"My dear fellow, don't get those notions into your head! I must do something for myself sometimes, and I've been on the look-out. Besides, I want my father to go on with his drainage, it would do good both to his health and his spirits. If I can advance any part of the money requisite, he and you shall pay me interest until you can return the capital."

"Roger, you're the providence of the family," exclaimed Osborne, suddenly struck by admiration at his brother's conduct, and forgetting to contrast it with his own.

So Roger went up to London and Osborne followed him, and for

two or three weeks the Gibsons saw nothing of the brothers. But as wave succeeds to wave, so interest succeeds to interest. "The family," as they were called, came down for their autumn sojourn at the Towers, and again the house was full of visitors, and the Towers' servants, and carriages, and liveries were seen in the two streets of Hollingford, just as they might have been seen for scores of autumns past.

So runs the round of life from day to day. Mrs. Gibson found the chances of intercourse with the Towers rather more personally exciting than Roger's visits, or the rarer calls of Osborne Hamley. Cynthia had an old antipathy to the great family who had made so much of her mother and so little of her; and whom she considered as in some measure the cause why she had seen so little of her mother in the days when the little girl had craved for love and found none. Moreover, Cynthia missed her slave, although she did not care for Roger one thousandth part of what he did for her; yet she had found it not unpleasant to have a man whom she thoroughly respected, and whom men in general respected, the subject of her eye, the glad ministrant to each scarce spoken wish, a person in whose sight all her words were pearls or diamonds, all her actions heavenly graciousness, and in whose thoughts she reigned supreme. She had no modest unconsciousness about her; and yet she was not vain. She knew of all this worship; and when from circumstances she no longer received it she missed it. The Earl and the Countess, Lord Hollingford and Lady Harriet, lords and ladies in general, liveries, dresses, bags of game, and rumours of riding parties were as nothing to her compared to Roger's absence. And yet she did not love him. No, she did not love him. Molly knew that Cynthia did not love him. Molly grew angry with her many and many a time as the conviction of this fact was forced upon her. Molly did not know her own feelings; Roger had no overwhelming interest in what they might be; while his very life-breath seemed to depend on what Cynthia felt and thought. Therefore Molly had keen insight into her "sister's" heart; and she knew that Cynthia did not love Roger. Molly could have cried with passionate regret at the thought of the unvalued treasure lying at Cynthia's feet; and it would have been a merely unselfish regret. It was the old fervid tenderness: "do not wish for the moon, O my darling, for I cannot give it thee." Cynthia's love was the moon Roger yearned for; and Molly saw that it was far away and out of reach, else would she have strained her heart-cords to give it to Roger.

"I am his sister," she would say to herself. "That old bond is not done away with, though he is too much absorbed by Cynthia to speak about it just now. His mother called me 'Fanny;' it was almost like an adoption. I must wait and watch, and see if I can do anything for my brother."

One day Lady Harriet came to call on the Gibsons, or rather on Mrs. Gibson, for the latter retained her old jealousy if any one else in Hollingford was supposed to be on intimate terms at the great house, or in the least acquainted with their plans. Mr. Gibson might possibly know as much, but then he was professionally bound to secrecy. Out of the house she considered Mr. Preston as her rival, and he was aware that she did so, and delighted in teasing her by affecting a knowledge of family plans and details of affairs of which she was ignorant. Indoors she was jealous of the fancy Lady Harriet had evidently taken for her step-daughter, and she contrived to place quiet obstacles in the way of a too frequent intercourse between them. These obstacles were not unlike the shield of the knight in the old story; only instead of the two sides presented to the two travellers approaching it from opposite quarters, one of which was silver, and one of which was gold, Lady Harriet saw the smooth and shining yellow radiance, while poor Molly only perceived a dull and heavy lead. To Lady Harriet it was "Molly is gone out; she will be sorry to miss you, but she was obliged to go to see some old friends of her mother's whom she ought not to neglect; as I said to her, constancy is everything. It is Sterne, I think, who says, 'Thine own and thy mother's friends forsake not.' But, dear Lady Harriet, you'll stop till she comes home, won't you? I know how fond you are of her; in fact" (with a little surface playfulness) "I sometimes say you come more to see her than your poor old Clare."

To Molly it had previously been,

"Lady Harriet is coming here this morning. I can't have any one else coming in. Tell Maria to say I'm not at home. Lady Harriet has always so much to tell me; dear Lady Harriet! I've known all her secrets since she was twelve years old. You two girls must keep out of the way. Of course she'll ask for you, out of common civility; but you would only interrupt us if you came in, as you did the other day;"—now addressing Molly—"I hardly like to say so, but I thought it was very forward."

"Maria told me she had asked for me," put in Molly, simply.

"Very forward indeed!" continued Mrs. Gibson, taking no further notice of the interruption, except to strengthen the words to which Molly's little speech had been intended as a correction.

"I think this time I must secure her ladyship from the chances of such an intrusion, by taking care that you are out of the house, Molly. You had better go to the Holly Farm, and speak about those damsons I ordered, and which have never been sent."

"I'll go," said Cynthia. "It's far too long a walk for Molly; she's had a bad cold, and is not as strong as she was a fortnight ago. I delight in long walks. If you want Molly out of the way, mamma, send her to the Miss Brownings', they are always glad to see her."

"I never said I wanted Molly out of the way, Cynthia," replied Mrs. Gibson. "You always put things in such an exaggerated—I should almost say, so coarse a manner. I am sure, Molly, my love, you could never have so misunderstood me; it is only on Lady Harriet's account."

"I don't think I can walk as far as the Holly Farm; papa would take the message; Cynthia need not go."

"Well! I'm the last person in the world to tax any one's strength; I'd sooner never see damson preserve again. Suppose you do go and see Miss Browning; you can pay her a nice long call, you know she likes that; and ask after Miss Phœbe's cold from me, you know. They were friends of your mother's, my dear, and I would not have you break off old friendships for the world. 'Constancy above everything' is my motto, as you know, and the memory of the dead ought always to be cherished."

"Now, mamma, where am I to go?" asked Cynthia. "Though Lady Harriet doesn't care for me as much as she does for Molly—indeed, quite the contrary I should say—yet she might ask after me, and I had better be safely out of the way."

"True!" said Mrs. Gibson, meditatively, yet unconscious of any satire in Cynthia's speech.

"She is much less likely to ask for you, my dear: I almost think you might remain in the house, or you might go to the Holly Farm; I really do want the damsons; or you might stay here in the dining-room, you know, so as to be ready to arrange lunch prettily, if she does take a fancy to stay for it. She is very fanciful, is dear Lady Harriet! I would not like her to think we made any difference in our meals because she stayed. 'Simple elegance,'

as I tell her, 'always is what we aim at.' But still you could put out the best service, and arrange some flowers, and ask cook what there is for dinner that she could send us for lunch, and make it all look pretty, and impromptu, and natural. I think you had better stay at home, Cynthia, and then you could fetch Molly from Miss Brownings' in the afternoon, you know, and you two could take a walk together.

"After Lady Harriet was fairly gone! I understand, mamma. Off with you, Molly. Make haste, or Lady Harriet may come and ask for you as well as mamma. I'll take care and forget where you are going to, so that no one shall learn from me where you are, and I'll answer for mamma's loss of memory."

"Child! what nonsense you talk; you quite confuse me with being so silly," said Mrs. Gibson, fluttered and annoyed as she usually was with the Lilliputian darts Cynthia flung at her. She had recourse to her accustomed feckless piece of retaliation—bestowing some favour on Molly; and this did not hurt Cynthia one whit.

"Molly, darling, there's a very cold wind, though it looks so fine. You had better put on my Indian shawl; and it will look so pretty, too, on your grey gown—scarlet and grey—it's not everybody I would lend it to, but you're so careful."

"Thank you," said Molly: and she left Mrs. Gibson in careless uncertainty as to whether her offer would be accepted or not.

Lady Harriet was sorry to miss Molly, as she was fond of the girl; but as she perfectly agreed with Mrs. Gibson's truism about "constancy" and "old friends," she saw no occasion for saying any more about the affair, but sat down in a little low chair with her feet on the fender. This said fender was made of bright bright steel, and was strictly tabooed to all household and plebeian feet; indeed the position, if they assumed it, was considered low-bred and vulgar.

"That's right, dear Lady Harriet! you can't think what a pleasure it is to me to welcome you at my own fireside, into my humble home."

"Humble! now, Clare, that's a little bit of nonsense, begging your pardon. I don't call this pretty little drawing-room a bit of a 'humble home.' It is as full of comforts, and of pretty things too, as any room of its size can be."

"Ah! how small you must feel it! even I had to reconcile myself to it at first."

"Well! perhaps your schoolroom was larger, but remember how bare it was, how empty of anything but deal tables, and forms, and mats. Oh, indeed, Clare, I quite agree with mamma, who always says you have done very well for yourself; and Mr. Gibson too! What an agreeable, well-informed man!"

"Yes, he is," said his wife, slowly, as if she did not like to relinquish her rôle of a victim to circumstances quite immediately. "He is very agreeable, very; only we see so little of him; and of course he comes home tired and hungry, and not inclined to talk to his own family, and apt to go to sleep."

"Come, come!" said Lady Harriet, "I'm going to have my turn now. We've had the complaint of a doctor's wife, now hear the moans of a peer's daughter. Our house is so overrun with visitors; and literally to-day I have come to you for a little solitude."

"Solitude!" exclaimed Mrs. Gibson. "Would you rather be alone?" slightly aggrieved.

"No, you dear silly woman; my solitude requires a listener, to whom I may say, 'how sweet is solitude.' But I am tired of the responsibility of entertaining. Papa is so open-hearted, he asks every friend he meets with to come and pay us a visit. Mamma is really a great invalid, but she does not choose to give up her reputation for good health, having always considered illness a want of self-control. So she gets wearied and worried by a crowd of people who are all of them open-mouthed for amusement of some kind; just like a brood of fledglings in a nest; so I have to be parent-bird, and pop morsels into their yellow leathery bills, to find them swallowed down before I can think of where to find the next. Oh, it's 'entertaining' in the largest, literalist, most dreariest sense of the word. So I have told a few lies this morning, and come off here for quietness and the comfort of complaining!"

Lady Harriet threw herself back in her chair, and yawned; Mrs. Gibson took one of her ladyship's hands in a soft sympathizing manner, and murmured,—

"Poor Lady Harriet!" and then she purred affectionately.

After a pause Lady Harriet started up and said—"I used to take you as my arbiter of morals when I was a little girl. Tell me, do you think it wrong to tell lies?"

"Oh, my dear! how can you ask such questions?—of course it is very wrong,—very wicked indeed, I think I may say. But I know you were only joking when you said you had told lies."

"No, indeed, I wasn't. I told as plump fat lies as you would wish to hear. I said I 'was obliged to go into Hollingford on business,' when the truth was there was no obligation in the matter, only an insupportable desire of being free from my visitors for an hour or two, and my only business was to come here, and yawn, and complain, and lounge at my leisure. I really think I'm unhappy at having told a story, as children express it."

"But, my dear Lady Harriet," said Mrs. Gibson, a little puzzled as to the exact meaning of the words that were trembling on her tongue, "I am sure you thought that you meant what you said, when you said it."

"No, I didn't," put in Lady Harriet.

"And besides, if you didn't, it was the fault of the tiresome people who drove you into such straits—yes, it was certainly their fault, not yours—and then you know the conventions of society—ah, what trammels they are!"

Lady Harriet was silent for a minute or two; then she said,—"Tell me, Clare; you've told lies sometimes, haven't you?"

"Lady Harriet! I think you might have known me better; but I know you don't mean it, dear."

"Yes, I do. You must have told white lies, at any rate. How did you feel after them?"

"I should have been miserable if I ever had. I should have died of self-reproach. 'The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,' has always seemed to me such a fine passage. But then I have so much that is unbending in my nature, and in our sphere of life there are so few temptations, if we are humble we are also simple, and unshackled by etiquette."

"Then you blame me very much? If somebody else will blame me, I shan't be so happy at what I said this morning."

"I am sure I never blamed you, not in my innermost heart, dear Lady Harriet. Blame you, indeed! That would be presumption in me."

"I think I shall set up a confessor! and it shan't be you, Clare, for you have always been only too indulgent to me."

After a pause she said,—"Can you give me some lunch, Clare? I don't mean to go home till three. My 'business' will take me till then, as the people at the Towers are duly informed."

"Certainly. I shall be delighted! but you know we are very simple in our habits."

"Oh, I only want a little bread-and-butter, and perhaps a slice of cold meat—you must not give yourself any trouble, Clare—perhaps you dine now? let me sit down just like one of your family."

"Yes, you shall; I won't make any alteration;—it will be so pleasant to have you sharing our family meal, dear Lady Harriet. But we dine late, we only lunch now. How low the fire is getting; I really am forgetting everything in the pleasure of this tête-à-tête!"

"So she rang twice; with great distinctness, and with a long pause between the rings. Maria brought in coals.

But the signal was as well understood by Cynthia as the "Hall of Apollo" was by the servants of Lucullus. The brace of partridges that were to have been for the late dinner were instantly put down to the fire; and the prettiest china brought out, and the table decked with flowers and fruit, arranged with all Cynthia's usual dexterity and taste. So that when the meal was announced, and Lady Harriet entered the room, she could not but think her hostess's apologies had been quite unnecessary; and be more and more convinced that Clare had done very well for herself. Cynthia now joined the party, pretty and elegant as she always was; but somehow she did not take Lady Harriet's fancy; she only noticed her on account of her being her mother's daughter. Her presence made the conversation more general, and Lady Harriet gave out several pieces of news, none of them of any great importance to her, but as what had been talked about by the circle of visitors assembled at the Towers.

"Lord Hollingford ought to have been with us," she said, amongst other things; "but he is obliged, or fancies himself obliged, which is all the same thing, to stay in town about this Crichton legacy!"

"A legacy? To Lord Hollingford? I am so glad!"

"Don't be in a hurry to be glad! It's nothing for him but trouble. Didn't you hear of that rich eccentric Mr. Crichton, who died some time ago, and—fired by the example of Lord Bridgewater, I suppose—left a sum of money in the hands of trustees, of whom my brother is one, to send out a man with a thousand fine qualifications, to make a scientific voyage, with a view to bringing back specimens of the fauna of distant lands, and so forming the nucleus of a museum which is to be called the Crichton Museum, and so perpetuate the founder's name. Such various forms does man's

vanity take! Sometimes it simulates philanthropy; sometimes a love of science!"

"It seems to me a very laudable and useful object, I am sure," said Mrs. Gibson, safely.

"I daresay it is, taking it from the public-good view. But it's rather tiresome to us privately, for it keeps Hollingford in town—or between it and Cambridge—and each place as dull and empty as can be, just when we want him down at the Towers. The thing ought to have been decided long ago, and there's some danger of the legacy lapsing. The two other trustees have run away to the Continent, feeling, as they say, the utmost confidence in him, but in reality shirking their responsibilities. However, I believe he likes it, so I ought not to grumble. He thinks he is going to be very successful in the choice of his man—and he belongs to this county, too,—young Hamley of Hamley, if he can only get his college to let him go, for he is a fellow of Trinity, senior wrangler or something; and they're not so foolish as to send their crack man to be eaten up by lions and tigers!"

"It must be Roger Hamley!" exclaimed Cynthia, her eyes brightening, and her cheeks flushing.

"He's not the eldest son; he can scarcely be called Hamley of Hamley!" said Mrs. Gibson.

"Hollingford's man is a fellow of Trinity, as I said before."

"Then it is Mr. Roger Hamley," said Cynthia; and he's up in London about some business! What news for Molly when she comes home!"

"Why, what has Molly to do with it?" asked Lady Harriet. "Is——?" and she looked into Mrs. Gibson's face for an answer. Mrs. Gibson in reply gave an intelligent and very expressive glance at Cynthia, who however did not perceive it.

"Oh, no! not at all," and Mrs. Gibson nodded a little at her daughter, as much as to say, "If any one, that."

Lady Harriet began to look at the pretty Miss Kirkpatrick with fresh interest; her brother had spoken in such a manner of this young Mr. Hamley that every one connected with the phœnix was worthy of observation. Then, as if the mention of Molly's name had brought her afresh into her mind, Lady Harriet said,—"And where is Molly all this time? I should like to see my little mentor. I hear she is very much grown since those days."

"Oh! when she once gets gossiping with the Miss Brownings, she never knows when to come home," said Mrs. Gibson.

"The Miss Brownings? Oh! I'm so glad you named them! I'm very fond of them. Pecksy and Flapsy; I may call them so in Molly's absence. I'll go and see them before I go home, and then perhaps I shall see my dear little Molly too. Do you know, Clare, I've quite taken a fancy to that girl!"

So Mrs. Gibson, after all her precautions, had to submit to Lady Harriet's leaving her half-an-hour earlier than she otherwise would have done in order to "make herself common" (as Mr. Gibson expressed it) by calling on the Miss Brownings.

But Molly had left before Lady Harriet arrived.

Molly went the long walk to the Holly Farm to order the damsons out of a kind of penitence. She had felt conscious of anger at being sent out of the house by such a palpable manœuvre as that which her stepmother had employed. Of course she did not meet Cynthia, so she went alone along the pretty lanes, with grassy sides and high-hedge banks not at all in the style of modern agriculture. At first she made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings—the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household ever since her father's second marriage. She knew that very often she longed to protest, but did not do it, from the desire of sparing her father any discord; and she saw by his face that he, too, was occasionally aware of certain things that gave him pain, as showing that his wife's standard of conduct was not as high as he would have liked. It was a wonder to Molly whether this silence was right or wrong. With a girl's want of toleration, and want of experience to teach her the force of circumstances, and of temptation, she had often been on the point of telling her stepmother some forcible home truths. But, possibly, her father's example of silence, and often some piece of kindness on Mrs. Gibson's part (for after her way, and when in a good temper, she was very kind to Molly), made her hold her tongue.

That night at dinner, Mrs. Gibson repeated the conversation between herself and Lady Harriet, giving it a very strong individual colouring, as was her wont, and telling nearly the whole of what had passed, although implying that there was a great deal said which was so purely confidential, that she was bound in honour not to repeat it. Her three auditors listened to her without interrupting

her much—indeed, without bestowing extreme attention on what she was saying, until she came to the fact of Lord Hollingford's absence in London, and the reason for it.

Roger Hamley going off on a scientific expedition!" exclaimed Mr. Gibson, suddenly awakened into vivacity.

"Yes. At least it is not settled finally; but as Lord Hollingford is the only trustee who takes any interest—and being Lord Cumnor's son—it is next to certain."

"I think I must have a voice in the matter," said Mr. Gibson; and he relapsed into silence, keeping his ears open, however, henceforward.

"How long will he be away?" asked Cynthia. "We shall miss him sadly."

Molly's lips formed an acquiescing "yes" to this remark, but no sound was heard. There was a buzzing in her ears as if the others were going on with the conversation, but the words they uttered seemed indistinct and blurred; they were merely conjectures, and did not interfere with the one great piece of news. To the rest of the party she appeared to be eating her dinner as usual, and, if she were silent, there was one listener the more to Mrs. Gibson's stream of prattle, and Mr. Gibson's and Cynthia's remarks.

CHAPTER IV.

BRIGHTENING PROSPECTS.

It was a day or two afterwards, that Mr. Gibson made time to ride round by Hamley, desirous to learn more exact particulars of this scheme for Roger than he could obtain from any extraneous source, and rather puzzled to know whether he should interfere in the project or not. The state of the case was this:—Osborne's symptoms were, in Mr. Gibson's opinion, signs of his having a fatal disease. Dr. Nicholls had differed from him on this head, and Mr. Gibson knew that the old physician had had long experience, and was considered very skilful in the profession. Still he believed that he himself was right, and, if so, the complaint was one which might continue for years in the same state as at present, or might end the young man's life in an hour—a minute. Supposing that Mr. Gibson was right, would it be well for Roger to be away where no sudden calls for his presence could reach him—away for two years? Yet if the affair was concluded, the interference of a medical man might accelerate the very evil to be feared; and after all Dr. Nicholls might be right, and the symptoms might proceed from some other cause. Might? Yes. Probably did? No. Mr. Gibson could not bring himself to say yes to this latter form of sentence. So he rode on, meditating; his reins slack, his head a little bent. It was one of those still and lovely autumn days when the red and yellow leaves are hanging-pegs to dewy, brilliant gossamer-webs; when the hedges are full of trailing brambles, loaded with ripe blackberries; when the air is full of the farewell whistles and pipes of birds, clear and short—not the long full-throated warbles of spring; when the whirr of the partridge's wing is heard in the stubble-fields, as the sharp hoof-blows fall on the paved lanes; when here and there a leaf floats and flutters down to the ground, although there is not a

single breath of wind. The country surgeon felt the beauty of the seasons perhaps more than most men. He saw more of it by day, by night, in storm and sunshine, or in the still, soft cloudy weather. He never spoke about what he felt on the subject; indeed, he did not put his feelings into words, even to himself. But if his mood ever approached to the sentimental it was on such days as this. He rode into the stable-yard, gave his horse to a man, and went into the house by a side entrance. In the passage he met the squire.

"That's capital, Gibson! what good wind blew you here? You'll have some lunch? it's on the table, I only just this minute left the room." And he kept shaking Mr. Gibson's hand all the time till he had placed him, nothing loth, at the well-covered dining-table.

"What's this I hear about Roger?" said Mr. Gibson, plunging at once into the subject.

"Aha! so you've heard, have you? It's famous, isn't it? He's a boy to be proud of, is old Roger. Steady Roger; we used to think him slow, but it seems to me that slow and sure wins the race. But tell me; what have you heard; how much is known? Nay, you must have a glass full. It's old ale, such as we don't brew now-a-days; it's as old as Osborne. We brewed it that autumn, and we called it the young squire's ale. I thought to have tapped it on his marriage, but I don't know when that will come to pass, so we've tapped it now in Roger's honour."

The old squire had evidently been enjoying the young squire's ale to the verge of prudence. It was indeed as he said, "as strong as brandy," and Mr. Gibson had to sip it very carefully, as he ate his cold roast beef.

"Well! and what have you heard? There's a deal to hear, and all good news, though I shall miss the lad, I know that."

"I did not know that it was settled; I only heard that it was in progress."

"Well, it was only in progress, as you call it, till last Tuesday. He never let me know anything about it, though; he says he thought I might be fidgety with thinking of the pros and cons. So I never knew a word on't till I had a letter from my Lord Hollingford—where is it?" pulling out a great black leathern receptacle for all manner of papers. And putting on his spectacles, he read aloud their headings.

"'Measurement of timber, new railways,' 'drench for cows,

from Farmer Hayes,' 'Dobson's accounts,'—'um 'um—here it is. Now read that letter," handing it to Mr. Gibson.

It was a manly, feeling, sensible letter, explaining to the old father in very simple language the services which were demanded by the terms of the will to which he and two or three others were trustees; the liberal allowance for expenses, the still more liberal reward for performance, which had tempted several men of considerable renown to offer themselves as candidates for the appointment. Lord Hollingford then went on to say that, having seen a good deal of Roger lately, since the publication of his article in reply to the French osteologist, he had had reason to think that in him the trustees would find united the various qualities required in a greater measure than in any of the applicants who had at that time presented themselves. Roger had deep interest in the subject; much acquired knowledge, and at the same time, great natural powers of comparison, and classification of facts; he had shown himself to be an observer of a fine and accurate kind, he was of the right age, in the very prime of health and strength, and unshackled by any family ties. Here Mr. Gibson paused for consideration. He hardly cared to ascertain by what steps the result had been arrived at—he already knew what that result was; but his mind was again arrested as his eye caught on the remuneration offered, which was indeed most liberal; and then he read with attention the high praise bestowed on the son in this letter to the father. The squire had been watching Mr. Gibson—waiting till he came to this part—and he rubbed his hands together as he said,—

"Ay! you've come to it at last. It's the best part of the whole, isn't it? God bless the boy! and from a Whig, mind you, which makes it the more handsome. And there's more to come still. I say, Gibson, I think my luck is turning at last," passing him on yet another letter to read. "That only came this morning; but I've acted on it already, I sent for the foreman of the drainage works at once, I did; and to-morrow, please God, they'll be at work again."

Mr. Gibson read the second letter, from Roger. To a certain degree it was a modest repetition of what Lord Hollingford had said, with an explanation of how he had come to take so decided a step in life without consulting his father. He did not wish him to be in suspense for one reason. Another was that he felt, as no one else could feel for him, that by accepting this offer, he entered upon the kind of life for which he knew himself to be most fitted. And

then he merged the whole into business. He said that he knew well the suffering his father had gone through when he had to give up his drainage works for want of money; that he, Roger, had been enabled at once to raise money upon the remuneration he was to receive on the accomplishment of his two years' work; and that he had insured his life at once, in order to provide for the repayment of the money he had raised, in case he did not live to return to England. He said that the sum he had borrowed on this security would at once be forwarded to his father.

Mr. Gibson laid down the letter without speaking a word for some time; then he said,—

"He'll have to pay a pretty sum for insuring his life beyond seas."

"He has got his Fellowship money," said the squire, a little depressed at Mr. Gibson's remark.

"Yes; that's true. And he's a strong young fellow, as I know."

"I wish I could tell his mother," said the squire in an under-tone.

"It seems all settled now," said Mr. Gibson, more in reply to his own thoughts than to the squire's remark.

"Yes!" said the squire; "and they're not going to let the grass grow under his feet. He's to be off as soon as he can get his scientific traps ready. I almost wish he wasn't to go. You don't seem quite to like it, doctor?"

"Yes, I do," said Mr. Gibson in a more cheerful tone than before. "It can't be helped now without doing a mischief," thought he to himself. "Why, squire, I think it a great honour to have such a son. I envy you, that's what I do. Here's a lad of three or four and twenty distinguishing himself in more ways than one, and as simple and affectionate at home as any fellow need to be—not a bit set up."

"Ay, ay; he's twice as much a son to me as Osborne, who has been all his life set up on nothing at all, as one may say."

"Come, squire, I must not hear anything against Osborne; we may praise one, without hitting at the other. Osborne has not had the strong health which has enabled Roger to work as he has done. I met a man who knew his tutor at Trinity the other day, and of course we began cracking about Roger—it's not every day that one can reckon a senior wrangler among one's friends, and I'm nearly as proud of the lad as you are. This Mr. Mason told me the tutor said that only half of Roger's success was owing to his mental powers; the other half was owing to his perfect health, which

enabled him to work harder and more continuously than most men without suffering. He said that in all his experience he had never known any one with an equal capacity for mental labour; and that he could come again with a fresh appetite to his studies after shorter intervals of rest than most. Now I, being a doctor, trace a good deal of his superiority to the material cause of a thoroughly good constitution, which Osborne has not got."

"Osborne might have if he got out o' doors more," said the squire, moodily; "but except when he can loaf into Hollingford he doesn't care to go out at all. I hope," he continued, with a glance of sudden suspicion at Mr. Gibson, "he's not after one of your girls? I don't mean any offence, you know; but he'll have the estate, and it won't be free, and he must marry money. I don't think I could allow it in Roger; but Osborne's the eldest son, you know."

Mr. Gibson reddened; he was offended for a moment. Then the partial truth of what the squire said was presented to his mind, and he remembered their old friendship, so he spoke quietly, if shortly.

"I don't believe there's anything of the kind going on. I'm not much at home, you know; but I've never heard or seen anything that should make me suppose that there is. When I do, I'll let you know."

"Now, Gibson, don't go and be offended. I'm glad for the boys to have a pleasant house to go to, and I thank you and Mrs. Gibson for making it pleasant. Only keep off love; it can come to no good. That's all. I don't believe Osborne will ever earn a farthing to keep a wife during my life, and if I were to die to-morrow, she would have to bring some money to clear the estate. And if I do speak as I shouldn't have done formerly—a little sharp or so—why, it's because I've been worried by many a care no one knows anything of."

"I'm not going to take offence," said Mr. Gibson, "but let us understand each other clearly. If you don't want your sons to come as much to my house as they do, tell them so yourself. I like the lads, and am glad to see them; but if they do come, you must take the consequences, whatever they are, and not blame me, or them either, for what may happen from the frequent intercourse between two young men and two young women; and what is more, though, as I said, I see nothing whatever of the kind you fear at present, and have promised to tell you of the first symptoms I do

see, yet farther than that I won't go. If there is an attachment at any future time, I won't interfere."

"I shouldn't so much mind if Roger fell in love with your Molly. He can fight for himself, you see, and she's an uncommon nice girl. My poor wife was so fond of her," answered the squire. "It's Osborne and the estate I'm thinking of!"

"Well, then, tell him not to come near us. I shall be sorry, but you will be safe."

"I'll think about it; but he's difficult to manage. I've always to get my blood well up before I can speak my mind to him."

Mr. Gibson was leaving the room, but at these words he turned and laid his hand on the squire's arm.

"Take my advice, squire. As I said, there is no harm done as yet, as far as I know. Prevention is better than cure. Speak out, but speak gently to Osborne, and do it at once. I shall understand how it is if he doesn't show his face for some months in my house. If you speak gently to him, he'll take the advice as from a friend. If he can assure you there's no danger, of course he'll come just as usual, when he likes."

It was all very fine giving the squire this good advice; but as Osborne had already formed the very kind of marriage his father most deprecated, it did not act quite as well as Mr. Gibson had hoped. The squire began the conversation with unusual self-control; but he grew irritated when Osborne denied his father's right to interfere in any marriage he might contemplate; denied it with a certain degree of doggedness and weariness of the subject that drove the squire into one of his passions; and although on after reflection he remembered that he had his son's promise and solemn word not to think of either Cynthia or Molly for his wife, yet the father and son had passed through one of those altercations which help to estrange men for life. Each had said bitter things to the other; and, if the brotherly affection had not been so true between Osborne and Roger, they too might have become alienated, in consequence of the squire's exaggerated and injudicious comparison of their characters and deeds. But as Roger in his boyhood had loved Osborne too well to be jealous of the praise and love the eldest son, the beautiful brilliant lad, had received, to the disparagement of his own plain awkwardness and slowness, so now Osborne strove against any feeling of envy or jealousy with all his might; but his efforts were conscious, Roger's had been the simple

consequence of affection, and the end to poor Osborne was that he became moody and depressed in mind and body; but both father and son concealed their feelings in Roger's presence. When he came home just before sailing, busy and happy, the squire caught his infectious energy, and Osborne looked up and was cheerful.

There was no time to be lost. He was bound to a hot climate, and must take all advantage possible of the winter months. He was to go first to Paris, to have interviews with some of the scientific men there. Some of his outfit, instruments, &c. were to follow him to Havre, from which port he was to embark, after transacting his business in Paris. The squire learnt all his arrangements and plans, and even tried in after-dinner conversations to penetrate into the questions involved in the researches his son was about to make. But Roger's visit home could not be prolonged beyond two days.

The last day he rode into Hollingford earlier than he needed to have done to catch the London coach, in order to bid the Gibsons good-by. He had been too actively busy for some time to have leisure to bestow much thought on Cynthia; but there was no need for fresh meditation on that subject. Her image as a prize to be worked for, to be served for seven years, and seven years more, was safe and sacred in his heart. It was very bad, this going away, and wishing her good-by for two long years; and he wondered much during his ride how far he should be justified in telling her mother, perhaps in telling her own sweet self, what his feelings were without expecting, nay, indeed reprobating, any answer on her part. Then she would know at any rate how dearly she was beloved by one who was absent; how in all difficulties or dangers the thought of her would be a polar star, high up in the heavens, and so on, and so on; for with all a lover's quickness of imagination and triteness of fancy, he called her a star, a flower, a nymph, a witch, an angel, or a mermaid, a nightingale, a siren, as one or another of her attributes rose up before him.

CHAPTER V.

A LOVER'S MISTAKE.

It was afternoon. Molly had gone out for a walk. Mrs. Gibson had been paying some calls. Lazy Cynthia had declined accompanying either. A daily walk was not a necessity to her as it was to Molly. On a lovely day, or with an agreeable object, or when the fancy took her, she could go as far as any one; but these were exceptional cases; in general, she was not disposed to disturb herself from her in-door occupations. Indeed, not one of the ladies would have left the house, had they been aware that Roger was in the neighbourhood; for they were aware that he was to come down but once before his departure, and that his stay at home then would be but for a short time, and they were all anxious to wish him good-by before his long absence. But they had understood that he was not coming to the Hall until the following week, and therefore they had felt themselves at full liberty this afternoon to follow their own devices.

Molly chose a walk that had been a favourite with her ever since she was a child. Something or other had happened just before she left home that made her begin wondering how far it was right, for the sake of domestic peace, to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with. Or, whether, as they are placed in families for distinct purposes, not by chance merely, there are not duties involved in this aspect of their lot in life,—whether by continually passing over failings, their own standard is not lowered,—the practical application of these thoughts being a dismal sort of perplexity on Molly's part as to whether her father was quite aware of her stepmother's perpetual lapses from truth; and whether his blindness was wilful or not. Then she felt bitterly enough that although she was sure as could be that there was no real estrangement between her and her father, yet

that there were perpetual obstacles thrown in the way of their intercourse; and she thought with a sigh that if he would but come in with authority, he might cut his way clear to the old intimacy with his daughter, and that they might have all the former walks and talks, and quips and cranks, and glimpses of real confidence once again; things that her stepmother did not value, yet which she, like the dog in the manger, prevented Molly enjoying. But after all Molly was a girl, not so far removed from childhood; and in the middle of her grave regrets and perplexities, her eye was caught by the sight of some fine ripe blackberries flourishing away high up on the hedge-bank among scarlet hips and green and russet leaves. She did not care much for blackberries herself; but she had heard Cynthia say that she liked them; and besides there was the charm of scrambling and gathering them; so she forgot all about her troubles, and went climbing up the banks, and clutching at her almost inaccessible prizes, and slipping down again triumphant, to carry them back to the large leaf which was to serve her as a basket. One or two of them she tasted, but they were as vapid to her palate as ever. The skirt of her pretty print gown was torn out of the gathers, and even with the fruit she had eaten "her pretty lips with blackberries were all besmeared and dyed," when having gathered as many and more than she could possibly carry, she set off home, hoping to escape into her room and mend her gown before it had offended Mrs. Gibson's neat eye. The front door was easily opened from the outside, and when Molly was out of the clear light of the open air and in the shadow of the hall, she saw a face peep out of the dining-room before she quite recognized whose it was; and then Mrs. Gibson came softly out, sufficiently at least to beckon her into the room. When Molly had entered Mrs. Gibson closed the door. Poor Molly expected a reprimand for her torn gown and untidy appearance, but was soon relieved by the expression of Mrs. Gibson's face—mysterious and radiant.

"I've been watching for you, dear. Don't go upstairs into the drawing-room, love. It might be a little interruption just now. Roger Hamley is there with Cynthia; and I've reason to think, in fact I did open the door unawares, but I shut it again softly, and I don't think they heard me. Is not it charming? Young love, you know, ah, how sweet it is!"

"Do you mean that Roger has proposed to Cynthia?" asked Molly.

"Not exactly that. But I don't know; of course I know nothing. Only I did hear him say that he had meant to leave England without speaking of his love, but that the temptation of seeing her alone had been too great for him. It was symptomatic, was it not, my dear? And all I wanted was to let him come to a crisis without interruption. So I've been watching for you to prevent your going in and disturbing them."

"But I may go to my own room, mayn't I," pleaded Molly.

"Of course," said Mrs. Gibson, a little testily. "Only I had expected sympathy from you at such an interesting moment."

But Molly did not hear these last words. She had escaped upstairs, and shut the door. Instinctively she had carried her leaf full of blackberries—what would blackberries be to Cynthia now? She felt as if she could not understand it all; but as for that matter, what could she understand? Nothing. For a few minutes her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being carried on in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead. Then the room grew stifling, and instinctively she went to the open casement window, and leant out, gasping for breath. Gradually the consciousness of the soft peaceful landscape stole into her mind, and stilled the buzzing confusion. There, bathed in the almost level rays of the autumn sunlight, lay the landscape she had known and loved from childhood; as quiet, as full of low humming life as it had been at this hour for many generations. The autumn flowers blazed out in the garden below, the lazy cows were in the meadow beyond, chewing their cud in the green aftermath; the evening fires had just been made up in the cottages beyond, in preparation for the husband's home-coming, and were sending up soft curls of blue smoke into the still air; the children, let loose from school, were shouting merrily in the distance, and she——Just then she heard nearer sounds; an opened door, steps on the lower flight of stairs. He could not have gone without even seeing her. He never, never would have done so cruel a thing—never would have forgotten poor little Molly, however happy he might be. No! there were steps and voices, and the drawing-room door was opened and shut once more. She laid down her head on her arms that rested upon the window-sill, and cried,—she had been so distrustful as to have let the idea enter her mind that he could go without wishing her good-by, her, whom his mother had so loved, and called by the name of

his little dead sister. And as she thought of the tender love Mrs. Hamley had borne her she cried the more, for the vanishing of such love for her off the face of the earth. Suddenly the drawing-room door opened, and some one was heard coming upstairs; it was Cynthia's step. Molly hastily wiped her eyes, and stood up and tried to look unconcerned; it was all she had time to do before Cynthia, after a little pause at the closed door, had knocked; and on an answer being given, had said, without opening the door,—"Molly! Mr. Roger Hamley is here, and wants to wish you good-by before he goes." Then she went downstairs again, as if anxious just at that moment to avoid even so short a tête-à-tête with Molly. With a gulp and a fit of resolution, as a child makes up its mind to swallow a nauseous dose of medicine, Molly went instantly down to the drawing-room.

Roger was talking earnestly to Mrs. Gibson in the bow of the window when Molly entered; Cynthia was standing near, listening, but taking no part in the conversation. Her eyes were downcast, and she did not look up as Molly drew shyly near.

Roger was saying,—"I could never forgive myself if I had accepted a pledge from her. She shall be free till my return; but the hope, the words, her sweet goodness, have made me happy beyond description. Oh, Molly!" suddenly becoming aware of her presence, and turning to her, and taking her hand in both of his,—"I think you have long guessed my secret, have you not? I once thought of speaking to you before I left, and confiding it all to you. But the temptation has been too great,—I have told Cynthia how fondly I love her, as far as words can tell; and she says——" then he looked at Cynthia with passionate delight, and seemed to forget in that gaze that he had left his sentence to Molly half finished.

Cynthia did not seem inclined to repeat her saying, whatever it was, but her mother spoke for her.

"My dear sweet girl values your love as it ought to be valued, I am sure. And I believe," looking at Cynthia and Roger with intelligent archness, "I could tell tales as to the cause of her indisposition in the spring."

"Mother," said Cynthia suddenly, "you know it was no such thing. Pray don't invent stories about me, I have engaged myself to Mr. Roger Hamley, and that is enough."

"Enough! more than enough!" said Roger. "I will not accept your pledge. I am bound, but you are free. I like to feel

bound, it makes me happy and at peace, but with all the chances involved in the next two years, you must not shackle yourself by promises.."

Cynthia did not speak at once; she was evidently revolving something in her own mind. Mrs. Gibson took up the word.

"You are very generous, I am sure. Perhaps it will be better not to mention it."

"I would much rather have it kept a secret," said Cynthia, interrupting.

"Certainly, my dear love. That was just what I was going to say. I once knew a young lady who heard of the death of a young man in America, whom she had known pretty well; and she immediately said she had been engaged to him, and even went so far as to put on weeds; and it was a false report, for he came back well and merry, and declared to everybody he had never so much as thought about her. So it was very awkward for her. These things had much better be kept secret until the proper time has come for divulging them."

Even then and there Cynthia could not resist the temptation of saying,—"Mamma, I will promise you I won't put on weeds, whatever reports come of Mr. Roger Hamley."

"Roger, please!" he put in, in a tender whisper.

"And you will all be witnesses that he has professed to think of me, if he is tempted afterwards to deny the fact. But at the same time I wish it to be kept a secret until his return—and I am sure you will all be so kind as to attend to my wish. Please, *Roger!* Please, Molly! Mamma, I must especially beg it of you!"

Roger would have granted anything when she asked him by that name, and in that tone. He took her hand in silent pledge of his reply. Molly felt as if she could never bring herself to name the affair as a common piece of news. So it was only Mrs. Gibson that answered aloud,—

"My dear child! why 'especially' to poor me? You know I'm the most trustworthy person alive!"

The little pendule on the chimney-piece struck the half-hour.

"I must go!" said Roger, in dismay. "I had no idea it was so late. I shall write from Paris. The coach will be at the George by this time, and will only stay five minutes. Dearest Cynthia——" he took her hand, and then, as if the temptation was irresistible, he drew her to him and kissed her. "Only remember

you are free!" said he, as he released her and passed on to Mrs. Gibson.

"If I had considered myself free," said Cynthia, blushing a little, but ready with a repartee to the last,—"if I thought myself free, do you think I would have allowed that?"

Then Molly's turn came, and the old brotherly tenderness came back into his look, his voice, his bearing.

"Molly! you won't forget me, I know; I shall never forget you, nor your goodness to—her." His voice began to quiver, and it was best to be gone. Mrs. Gibson was pouring out, unheard and unheeded, words of farewell; Cynthia was re-arranging some flowers in a vase on the table, the defects in which had caught her artistic eye, without the consciousness penetrating to her mind. Molly stood, numb to the heart; neither glad nor sorry, nor anything but stunned. She felt the slackened touch of the warm grasping hand; she looked up—for till now her eyes had been downcast, as if there were heavy weights to their lids—and the place was empty where he had been; his quick step was heard on the stair, the front door was opened and shut; and then as quick as lightning Molly ran up to the front attic—the lumber-room, whose window commanded the street down which he must pass. The window-clasp was unused and stiff, Molly tugged at it—unless it was open, and her head put out, that last chance would be gone.

"I must see him again; I must! I must!" she wailed out, as she was pulling. There he was, running hard to catch the London coach; his luggage had been left at the George before he came up to wish the Gibsons good-by. In all his hurry, Molly saw him turn round and shade his eyes from the level rays of the westering sun, and rake the house with his glances—in hopes, she knew, of catching one more glimpse of Cynthia. But apparently he saw no one, not even Molly at the attic casement; for she had drawn back when he turned, and kept herself in shadow; for she had no right to put herself forward as the one to watch and yearn for farewell signs. None came—another moment—he was out of sight for years.

She shut the window softly, and shivered all over. She left the attic and went to her own room; but she did not begin to take off her out-of-door things till she heard Cynthia's foot on the stairs. Then she hastily went to the toilet-table, and began to untie her bonnet-strings; but they were in a knot, and took time to undo.

Cynthia's step stopped at Molly's door; she opened it a little and said,—"May I come in, Molly?"

"Certainly," said Molly, longing to be able to say "No" all the time. Molly did not turn to meet her, so Cynthia came up behind her, and putting her two hands round Molly's waist, peeped over her shoulder, putting out her lips to be kissed. Molly could not resist the action—the mute entreaty for a caress. But, in the moment before, she had caught reflections of the two faces in the glass; her own, red-eyed, pale, with lips dyed with blackberry juice, her curls tangled, her bonnet pulled awry, her gown torn—and contrasted it with Cynthia's brightness and bloom, and the trim elegance of her dress. "Oh! it is no wonder!" thought poor Molly, as she turned, and put her arms round Cynthia, and laid her head for an instant on her shoulder—the weary, aching head that sought a loving pillow in that supreme moment! The next she had raised herself, and taken Cynthia's two hands, and was holding her off a little, the better to read her face.

"Cynthia! you do love him dearly, don't you?"

Cynthia winced a little aside from the penetrating steadiness of those eyes.

"You speak with all the solemnity of an adjuration, Molly!" said she, laughing a little at first to cover her nervousness, and then looking up at Molly. "Don't you think I've given a proof of it? But you know I've often told you I've not the gift of loving; I said pretty much the same thing to him. I can respect, and I fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one, not even for you, little Molly, and I am sure I love you more than——"

"No, don't!" said Molly, putting her hand before Cynthia's mouth, in almost a passion of impatience. "Don't, don't—I won't hear you—I ought not to have asked you—it makes you tell lies!"

"Why, Molly!" said Cynthia, in her turn seeking to read Molly's face, "what's the matter with you? One might think you cared for him yourself."

"I?" said Molly, all the blood rushing to her heart suddenly; then it returned, and she had courage to speak, and she spoke the truth as she believed it, though not the real actual truth.

"I do care for him; I think you have won the love of a prince amongst men. Why, I am proud to remember that he has been to

"Oh! it is no wonder!"

me as a brother, and I love him as a sister, and I love you doubly because he has honoured you with his love."

"Come, that's not complimentary!" said Cynthia, laughing, but not ill-pleased to hear her lover's praises, and even willing to depreciate him a little in order to hear more.

"He's well enough, I daresay, and a great deal too learned and clever for a stupid girl like me; but even you must acknowledge he is very plain and awkward; and I like pretty things and pretty people."

"Cynthia, I won't talk to you about him. You know you don't mean what you are saying, and only say it out of contradiction, because I praise him. He shan't be run down by you, even in joke."

"Well, then, we won't talk of him at all. I was so surprised when he began to speak—so——" and Cynthia looked very lovely, blushing and dimpling up as she remembered his words and looks. Suddenly she recalled herself to the present time, and her eye caught on the leaf full of blackberries—the broad green leaf, so fresh and crisp when Molly had gathered it an hour or so ago, but now soft and flabby, and dying. Molly saw it, too, and felt a strange kind of sympathetic pity for the poor inanimate leaf.

"Oh! what blackberries! you've gathered them for me, I know!" said Cynthia, sitting down and beginning to feed herself daintily, touching them lightly with the ends of her taper fingers, and dropping each ripe berry into her open mouth. When she had eaten about half she stopped suddenly short.

"How I should like to have gone as far as Paris with him!" she exclaimed. "I suppose it wouldn't have been proper; but how pleasant it would have been! I remember at Boulogne" (another blackberry), "how I used to envy the English who were going to Paris; it seemed to me then as if nobody stopped at Boulogne, but dull, stupid school-girls."

"When will he be there?" asked Molly.

"On Wednesday, he said. I'm to write to him there; at any rate he is going to write to me."

Molly went about the adjustment of her dress in a quiet, business-like manner, not speaking much; Cynthia, although sitting still, seemed very restless. Oh! how much Molly wished that she would go.

"Perhaps, after all," said Cynthia, after a pause of apparent meditation, "we shall never be married."

"Why do you say that?" said Molly, almost bitterly. "You have nothing to make you think so. I wonder how you can bear to think you won't, even for a moment."

"Oh!" said Cynthia; "you must not go and take me *au grand sérieux*. I daresay I don't mean what I say, but you see everything seems a dream at present. Still, I think the chances are equal—the chances for and against our marriage, I mean. Two years! it's a long time! he may change his mind, or I may; or some one else may turn up, and I may get engaged to him: what should you think of that, Molly? I'm putting such a gloomy thing as death quite on one side, you see; yet in two years how much may happen!"

"Don't talk so, Cynthia, please don't," said Molly, piteously. "One would think you didn't care for him, and he cares so much for you!"

"Why, did I say I did not care for him? I was only calculating chances. I'm sure I hope nothing will happen to prevent the marriage. Only, you know it may, and I thought I was taking a step in wisdom, in looking forward to all the evils that might befall. I'm sure all the wise people I've ever known thought it a virtue to have gloomy prognostics of the future. But you're not in a mood for wisdom or virtue, I see; so I'll go and get ready for dinner, and leave you to your vanities of dress."

She took Molly's face in both her hands, before Molly was aware of her intention, and kissed it playfully. Then she left Molly to herself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOTHER'S MANŒUVRE.

Mr. Gibson was not at home at dinner—detained by some patient, most probably. This was not an unusual occurrence; but it *was* rather an unusual occurrence for Mrs. Gibson to go down into the dining-room, and sit with him as he ate his deferred meal when he came in an hour or two later. In general, she preferred her easy-chair, or her corner of the sofa, upstairs in the drawing-room, though it was very rarely that she would allow Molly to avail herself of her stepmother's neglected privilege. Molly would fain have gone down and kept her father company every night that he had these solitary meals; but for peace and quietness she gave up her own wishes on the matter.

Mrs. Gibson took a seat by the fire in the dining-room, and patiently waited for the auspicious moment when Mr. Gibson, having satisfied his healthy appetite, turned from the table, and took his place by her side. She got up, and with unaccustomed attention she moved the wine and glasses so that he could help himself without moving from his chair.

"There, now! are you comfortable? for I have a great piece of news to tell you!" said she, when all was arranged.

"I thought there was something on hand," said he, smiling. "Now for it!"

"Roger Hamley has been here this afternoon to bid us good-by."

"Good-by! Is he gone? I didn't know he was going so soon!" exclaimed Mr. Gibson.

"Yes: never mind, that's not it."

"But tell me; has he left this neighbourhood? I wanted to have seen him."

"Yes, yes. He left love and regret, and all that sort of thing

for you. Now let me get on with my story: he found Cynthia alone, proposed to her, and was accepted."

"Cynthia? Roger proposed to her, and she accepted him?" repeated Mr. Gibson, slowly.

"Yes, to be sure. Why not? you speak as if it was something so very surprising."

"Did I? But I am surprised. He's a very fine young fellow, and I wish Cynthia joy; but do you like it? It will have to be a very long engagement."

"Perhaps," said she, in a knowing manner.

"At any rate he will be away for two years," said Mr. Gibson.

"A great deal may happen in two years," she replied.

"Yes! he will have to run many risks, and go into many dangers, and will come back no nearer to the power of maintaining a wife than when he went out."

"I don't know that," she replied, still in the arch manner of one possessing superior knowledge. "A little bird did tell me that Osborne's life is not so very secure; and then—what will Roger be? Heir to the estate."

"Who told you that about Osborne?" said he, facing round upon her, and frightening her with his sudden sternness of voice and manner. It seemed as if absolute fire came out of his long dark sombre eyes. "*Who* told you, I say?"

She made a faint rally back into her former playfulness.

"Why? can you deny it? Is it not the truth?"

"I ask you again, Hyacinth, who told you that Osborne Hamley's life is in more danger than mine—or yours?"

"Oh, don't speak in that frightening way. My life is not in danger, I'm sure; nor yours either, love, I hope."

He gave an impatient movement, and knocked a wine-glass off the table. For the moment she felt grateful for the diversion, and busied herself in picking up the fragments: "bits of glass were so dangerous," she said. But she was startled by a voice of command, such as she had never yet heard from her husband.

"Never mind the glass. I ask you again, Hyacinth, who told you anything about Osborne Hamley's state of health?"

"I am sure I wish no harm to him, and I daresay he is in very good health, as you say," whispered she, at last.

"Who told——?" began he again, sterner than ever.

"Well, if you will know, and will make such a fuss about it,"

said she, driven to extremity, "it was you yourself—you or Dr. Nicholls, I am sure I forget which."

"I never spoke to you on the subject, and I don't believe Nicholls did. You'd better tell me at once what you are alluding to, for I'm resolved I'll have it out before we leave this room."

"I wish I'd never married again," she said, now fairly crying, and looking round the room, as if in vain search for a mouse-hole in which to hide herself. Then, as if the sight of the door into the store-room gave her courage, she turned and faced him.

"You should not talk your medical secrets so loud then, if you don't want people to hear them. I had to go into the store-room that day Dr. Nicholls was here; cook wanted a jar of preserve, and stopped me just as I was going out—I am sure it was for no pleasure of mine, for I was sadly afraid of stickying my gloves—it was all that you might have a comfortable dinner."

She looked as if she was going to cry again, but he gravely motioned her to go on, merely saying,—

"Well! you overheard our conversation, I suppose?"

"Not much," she answered eagerly, almost relieved by being thus helped out in her forced confession. "Only a sentence or two."

"What were they?" he asked.

"Why, you had just been saying something, and Dr. Nicholls said, 'If he has got aneurism of the aorta his days are numbered.'"

"Well. Anything more?"

"Yes; you said, 'I hope to God I may be mistaken; but there is a pretty clear indication of symptoms, in my opinion.'"

"How do you know we were speaking of Osborne Hamley?" he asked; perhaps in hopes of throwing her off the scent. But as soon as she perceived that he was descending to her level of subterfuge, she took courage, and said in quite a different tone to the cowed one which she had been using,

"Oh! I know. I heard his name mentioned by you both before I began to listen."

"Then you own you did listen?"

"Yes," said she, hesitating a little now.

"And pray how do you come to remember so exactly the name of the disease spoken of?"

"Because I went——now don't be angry, I really can't see any harm in what I did——"

"There, don't deprecate anger. You went——"

"Into the surgery, and looked it out. Why might not I?"

Mr. Gibson did not answer—did not look at her. His face was very pale, and both forehead and lips were contracted. At length he roused himself, sighed, and said,—

"Well! I suppose as one brews one must bake?"

"I don't understand what you mean," pouted she.

"Perhaps not," he replied. "I suppose that it was what you heard on that occasion that made you change your behaviour to Roger Hamley? I've noticed how much more civil you were to him of late."

"If you mean that I have ever got to like him as much as Osborne, you are very much mistaken; no, not even though he has offered to Cynthia, and is to be my son-in-law."

"Let me know the whole affair. You overheard,—I will own that it was Osborne about whom we were speaking, though I shall have something to say about that presently—and then, if I understand you rightly, you changed your behaviour to Roger, and made him more welcome to this house than you had ever done before, regarding him as proximate heir to the Hamley estates?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'proximate.'"

"Go into the surgery, and look into the dictionary then," said he, losing his temper for the first time during the conversation.

"I knew," said she through sobs and tears, "that Roger had taken a fancy to Cynthia; any one might see that; and as long as Roger was only a younger son, with no profession, and nothing but his fellowship, I thought it right to discourage him, as any one would who had a grain of common sense in them; for a clumsier, more common, awkward, stupid fellow I never saw—to be called county, I mean."

"Take care; you'll have to eat your words presently when you come to fancy he'll have Hamley some day."

"No, I shan't," said she, not perceiving his exact drift. "You are vexed now because it is not Molly he's in love with; and I call it very unjust and unfair to my poor fatherless girl. I am sure I have always tried to further Molly's interests as if she was my own daughter."

Mr. Gibson was too indifferent to this accusation to take any notice of it. He returned to what was of far more importance to him.

"The point I want to be clear about is this. Did you or did you not alter your behaviour to Roger in consequence of what you overheard of my professional conversation with Dr. Nicholls? Have you not favoured his suit to Cynthia since then, on the understanding gathered from that conversation that he stood a good chance of inheriting Hamley?"

"I suppose I have," said she, sulkily. "And if I did, I can't see any harm in it, that I should be questioned as if I were in a witness-box. He was in love with Cynthia long before that conversation, and she liked him so much. It was not for me to cross the path of true love. I don't see how you would have a mother love for her child if she may not turn accidental circumstances to her advantage. Perhaps Cynthia might have died if she had been crossed in love; her poor father was consumptive."

"Don't you know that all professional conversations are confidential? That it would be the most dishonourable thing possible for me to betray secrets which I learn in the exercise of my profession?"

"Yes, of course, you."

"Well! and are not you and I one in all these respects? You cannot do a dishonourable act without my being inculpated in the disgrace. If it would be a deep disgrace for me to betray a professional secret, what would it be for me to trade on that knowledge?"

He was trying hard to be patient; but the offence was of that class which galled him insupportably.

"I don't know what you mean by trading. Trading in a daughter's affections is the last thing I should do; and I should have thought you would be rather glad than otherwise to get Cynthia well married, and off your hands."

Mr. Gibson got up, and walked about the room, his hands in his pockets. Once or twice he began to speak, but he stopped impatiently short without going on.

"I don't know what to say to you," he said at length. "You either can't or won't see what I mean. I'm glad enough to have Cynthia here. I have given her a true welcome, and I sincerely hope she will find this house as much a home as my own daughter does. But for the future I must look out of my doors, and double-lock the approaches if I am so foolish as to—— However, that's past and gone; and it remains with me to prevent its recurrence

as far as I can for the future. Now let us hear the present state of affairs."

"I don't think I ought to tell you anything about it. It is a secret, just as much as your mysteries are."

"Very well; you have told me enough for me to act upon, which I most certainly shall do. It was only the other day I promised the squire to let him know if I suspected anything—any love affair, or entanglement, much less an engagement, between either of his sons and our girls."

"But this is not an engagement; he would not let it be so; if you would only listen to me, I could tell you all. Only I do hope you won't go and tell the squire and everybody. Cynthia did so beg that it might not be known. It is only my unfortunate frankness that has led me into this scrape. I never could keep a secret from those whom I love."

"I must tell the squire. I shall not mention it to any one else. And do you quite think it was consistent with your general frankness to have overheard what you did, and never to have mentioned it to me? I could have told you then that Dr. Nicholls' opinion was decidedly opposed to mine, and that he believed that the disturbance about which I consulted him on Osborne's behalf was merely temporary. Dr. Nicholls would tell you that Osborne is as likely as any man to live and marry and beget children."

If there was any skill used by Mr. Gibson so to word this speech as to conceal his own opinion, Mrs. Gibson was not sharp enough to find it out. She was dismayed, and Mr. Gibson enjoyed her dismay; it restored him to something like his usual frame of mind.

"Let us review this misfortune, for I see you consider it as such," said he.

"No, not quite a misfortune," said she. "But certainly if I had known Dr. Nicholls' opinion——" she hesitated.

"You see the advantage of always consulting me," he continued gravely. "Here is Cynthia engaged——"

"Not engaged, I told you before. He would not allow it to be considered an engagement on her part."

"Well, entangled in a love affair with a lad of three-and-twenty, with nothing beyond his fellowship and a chance of inheriting an encumbered estate; no profession even, abroad for two years, and I must go and tell his father all about it to-morrow."

"O dear, pray say that, if he dislikes it, he has only to express his opinion."

"I don't think you can act without Cynthia in the affair. And, if I am not mistaken, Cynthia will have a pretty stout will of her own on the subject."

"Oh, I don't think she cares for him very much; she is not one to be always falling in love, and she does not take things very deeply to heart. But of course one would not do anything abruptly; two years' absence gives one plenty of time to turn oneself in."

"But a little time ago we were threatened with consumption and an early death if Cynthia's affections were thwarted."

"Oh, you dear creature, how you remember all my silly words! It might be; you know poor dear Mr. Kirkpatrick was consumptive, and Cynthia may have inherited it, and a great sorrow might bring out the latent seeds. At times I am so fearful. But I daresay it is not probable, for I don't think she takes things very deeply to heart."

"Then I am quite at liberty to give up the affair, acting as Cynthia's proxy, if the squire disapproves of it?"

Poor Mrs. Gibson was in a strait at this question.

"No!" she said at last. "We cannot give it up. I am sure Cynthia would not; especially if she thought others were acting for her. And he really is very much in love. I wish he were in Osborne's place."

"Shall I tell you what I should do?" said Mr. Gibson, in real earnest. "However it may be brought about, here are two young people in love with each other. One is as fine a young fellow as ever breathed; the other a very pretty, lively, agreeable girl. The father of the young man must be told, and it is most likely he will bluster and oppose; for there is no doubt it is an imprudent affair as far as money goes. But let them be steady and patient, and a better lot need await no young woman. I only wish it were Molly's good fortune to meet with such another."

"I will try for her; I will indeed," said Mrs. Gibson, relieved by his change of tone.

"No, don't. That's one thing I forbid. I'll have no 'trying' for Molly."

"Well, don't be angry, dear! Do you know I was quite afraid you were going to lose your temper at one time."

"It would have been of no use!" said he, gloomily, getting up as if to close the sitting. His wife was only too glad to make her escape. The conjugal interview had not been satisfactory to either. Mr. Gibson had been compelled to face and acknowledge the fact, that the wife he had chosen had a very different standard of conduct from that which he had upheld all his life, and had hoped to have seen inculcated in his daughter. He was more irritated than he chose to show; for there was so much of self-reproach in his irritation that he kept it to himself, brooded over it, and allowed a feeling of suspicious dissatisfaction with his wife to grow up in his mind, which extended itself by-and-by to the innocent Cynthia, and caused his manner to both mother and daughter to assume a certain curt severity, which took the latter at any rate with extreme surprise. But on the present occasion he followed his wife up to the drawing-room, and gravely congratulated the astonished Cynthia.

"Has mamma told you?" said she, shooting an indignant glance at her mother. "It is hardly an engagement; and we all pledged ourselves to keep it a secret, mamma among the rest!"

"But, my dearest Cynthia, you could not expect—you could not have wished me to keep a secret from my husband?" pleaded Mrs. Gibson.

"No, perhaps not. At any rate, sir," said Cynthia, turning towards him with graceful frankness, "I am glad you should know it. You have always been a most kind friend to me, and I daresay I should have told you myself, but I did not want it named; if you please it must still be a secret. In fact, it is hardly an engagement —he" (she blushed and sparkled a little at the euphuism, which implied that there was but one "he" present in her thoughts at the moment) "would not allow me to bind myself by any promise until his return!"

Mr. Gibson looked gravely at her, irresponsive to her winning looks, which at the moment reminded him too forcibly of her mother's ways. Then he took her hand, and said, seriously enough,—

"I hope you are worthy of him, Cynthia, for you have indeed drawn a prize. I have never known a truer or warmer heart than Roger's; and I have known him boy and man."

Molly felt as if she could have thanked her father aloud for this testimony to the value of him who was gone away. But Cynthia pouted a little before she smiled up in his face.

"You are not complimentary, are you, Mr. Gibson?" said she. "He thinks me worthy, I suppose; and if you have so high an opinion of him, you ought to respect his judgment of me." If she hoped to provoke a compliment she was disappointed, for Mr. Gibson let go her hand in an absent manner, and sate down in an easy chair by the fire, gazing at the wood embers as if hoping to read the future in them. Molly saw Cynthia's eyes filled with tears, and followed her to the other end of the room, where she had gone to seek some working materials.

"Dear Cynthia," was all she said; but she pressed her hand while trying to assist in the search.

"Oh, Molly, I am so fond of your father; what makes him speak so to me to-night?"

"I don't know," said Molly; "perhaps he's tired."

They were recalled from further conversation by Mr. Gibson. He had roused himself from his reverie, and was now addressing Cynthia.

"I hope you will not consider it a breach of confidence, Cynthia, but I must tell the squire of—of what has taken place to-day between you and his son. I have bound myself by a promise to him. He was afraid—it's as well to tell you the truth—he was afraid" (an emphasis on this last word) "of something of this kind between his sons and one of you two girls. It was only the other day I assured him there was nothing of the kind on foot; and I told him then I would inform him at once if I saw any symptoms."

Cynthia looked extremely annoyed.

"It was the one thing I stipulated for—secrecy."

"But why?" said Mr. Gibson. "I can understand your not wishing to have it made public under the present circumstances. But the nearest friends on both sides! Surely you can have no objection to that?"

"Yes, I have," said Cynthia; "I would not have had any one know if I could have helped it."

"I am almost certain Roger will tell his father."

"No, he won't," said Cynthia; "I made him promise, and I think he is one to respect a promise"—with a glance at her mother, who, feeling herself in disgrace with both husband and child, was keeping a judicious silence.

"Well, at any rate, the story would come with so much better a grace from him that I shall give him the chance; I won't go over

to the Hall till the end of the week ; he may have written and told his father before then."

Cynthia held her tongue for a little while. Then she said, with tearful pettishness,—

"A man's promise is to override a woman's wish, then, is it?"

"I don't see any reason why it should not."

"Will you trust in my reasons when I tell you it will cause me a great deal of distress if it gets known?" She said this in so pleading a voice, that if Mr. Gibson had not been thoroughly displeased and annoyed by his previous conversation with her mother, he must have yielded to her. As it was, he said, coldly,—"Telling Roger's father is not making it public. I don't like this exaggerated desire for such secrecy, Cynthia. It seems to me as if something more than is apparent was concealed behind it."

"Come, Molly," said Cynthia, suddenly ; "let us sing that duet I've been teaching you; it's better than talking as we are doing."

It was a little lively French duet. Molly sang it carelessly, with heaviness at her heart; but Cynthia sang it with spirit and apparent merriment ; only she broke down in hysterics at last, and flew upstairs to her own room. Molly, heeding nothing else—neither her father nor Mrs. Gibson's words—followed her, and found the door of her bedroom locked, and for all reply to her entreaties to be allowed to come in, she heard Cynthia sobbing and crying.

It was more than a week after the incidents last recorded before Mr. Gibson found himself at liberty to call on the squire ; and he heartily hoped that long before then, Roger's letter might have arrived from Paris, telling his father the whole story. But he saw at the first glance that the squire had heard nothing unusual to disturb his equanimity. He was looking better than he had done for months past ; the light of hope was in his eyes, his face seemed of a healthy ruddy colour, gained partly by his resumption of outdoor employment in the superintendence of the works, and partly because the happiness he had lately had through Roger's means, caused his blood to flow with regular vigour. He had felt Roger's going away, it is true; but whenever the sorrow of parting with him pressed too heavily upon him, he filled his pipe, and smoked it out over a long, slow, deliberate, re-perusal of Lord Hollingford's letter, every word of which he knew by heart ; but expressions in which he made a pretence to himself of doubting, that he might have an

excuse for looking at his son's praises once again. The first greetings over, Mr. Gibson plunged into his subject.

"Any news from Roger yet?"

"Oh, yes; here's his letter," said the squire, producing his black leather case, in which Roger's missive had been placed along with the other very heterogeneous contents.

Mr. Gibson read it, hardly seeing the words after he had by one rapid glance assured himself that there was no mention of Cynthia in it.

"Hum! I see he doesn't name one very important event that has befallen him since he left you," said Mr. Gibson, seizing on the first words that came. "I believe I'm committing a breach of confidence on one side; but I'm going to keep the promise I made the last time I was here. I find there is something—something of the kind you apprehended—you understand—between him and my stepdaughter, Cynthia Kirkpatrick. He called at our house to wish us good-by, while waiting for the London coach, found her alone, and spoke to her. They don't call it an engagement, but of course it is one."

"Give me back the letter," said the squire, in a constrained kind of voice. Then he read it again, as if he had not previously mastered its contents, and as if there might be some sentence or sentences he had overlooked.

"No!" he said at last, with a sigh. "He tells me nothing about it. Lads may play at confidences with their fathers, but they keep a deal back." The squire appeared more disappointed at not having heard of this straight from Roger than displeased at the fact itself, Mr. Gibson thought. But he let him take his time.

"He's not the eldest son," continued the squire, talking as it were to himself. "But it's not the match I should have planned for him. How came you, sir," said he, firing round on Mr. Gibson, suddenly—"to say when you were last here, that there was nothing between my sons and either of your girls? Why, this must have been going on all the time!"

"I'm afraid it was. But I was as ignorant about it as the babe unborn. I only heard of it on the evening of the day of Roger's departure."

"And that's a week ago, sir. What's kept you quiet ever since?"

"I thought that Roger would tell you himself."

"That shows you've no sons. More than half their life is unknown to their fathers. Why, Osborne there, we live together —that's to say, we have our meals together, and we sleep under the same roof—and yet—Well! well! life is as God has made it. You say it's not an engagement yet? But I wonder what I'm doing? Hoping for my lad's disappointment in the folly he's set his heart on—and just when he's been helping me. Is it a folly, or is it not? I ask you, Gibson, for you must know this girl. She hasn't much money, I suppose?"

"About thirty pounds a year, at my pleasure during her mother's life.

"Whew? It's well he's not Osborne. They'll have to wait. What family is she of? None of 'em in trade, I reckon, from her being so poor?"

"I believe her father was grandson of a certain Sir Gerald Kirkpatrick. Her mother tells me it is an old baronetcy. I know nothing of such things."

"That's something. I do know something of such things, as you are pleased to call them. I like honourable blood."

Mr. Gibson could not help saying, "But I'm afraid that only one-eighth of Cynthia's blood is honourable; I know nothing further of her relations excepting the fact that her father was a curate."

"Professional. That's a step above trade at any rate. How old is she?"

"Eighteen or nineteen."

"Pretty?"

"Yes, I think so; most people do; but it is all a matter of taste. Come, squire, judge for yourself. Ride over and take lunch with us any day you like. I may not be in; but her mother will be there, and you can make acquaintance with your son's future wife."

This was going too fast, however; presuming too much on the quietness with which the squire had been questioning him. Mr. Hamley drew back within his shell, and spoke in a surly manner as he replied,—

"Roger's 'future wife!' he'll be wiser by the time he comes home. Two years among the black folks will have put more sense in him.'

"Possible, but not probable, I should say," replied Mr. Gibson. "Black folk are not remarkable for their powers of reasoning, I

believe, so that they haven't much chance of altering his opinion by argument, even if they understood each other's language; and certainly if he shares my taste, their peculiarity of complexion will only make him appreciate white skins the more."

"But you said it was no engagement," growled the squire. "If he thinks better of it, you won't keep him to it, will you?"

"If he wishes to break it off, I shall certainly advise Cynthia to be equally willing, that's all I can say. And I see no reason for discussing the affair further at present. I have told you how matters stand because I promised you I would, if I saw anything of this kind going on. But in the present condition of things, we can neither make nor mar; we can only wait." And he took up his hat to go. But the squire was discontented.

"Don't go, Gibson. Don't take offence at what I've said, though I'm sure I don't know why you should. What is the girl like in herself?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Gibson. But he did; only he was vexed, and did not choose to understand.

"Is she—well, is she like your Molly?—sweet-tempered and sensible—with her gloves always mended, and neat about the feet, and ready to do anything one asks her just as if doing it was the very thing she liked best in the world?"

Mr. Gibson's face relaxed now, and he could understand all the squire's broken sentences and unexplained meanings.

"She is much prettier than Molly to begin with, and has very winning ways. She is always well-dressed and smart-looking, and I know she has not much to spend on her clothes, and always does what she is asked to do, and is ready enough with her pretty, lively answers. I don't think I ever saw her out of temper; but then I'm not sure if she takes things keenly to heart, and a certain obtuseness of feeling goes a great way towards a character for good temper, I've observed. Altogether, I think Cynthia is one in a hundred."

The squire meditated a little. "Your Molly is one in a thousand, to my mind. But then you see she comes of no family at all,—and I don't suppose she'll have a chance of much money." This he said as if he were thinking aloud, and without reference to Mr. Gibson, but it nettled the latter, and he replied somewhat impatiently,—

"Well, but as there is no question of Molly in this business, I

don't see the use of bringing her name in, and considering either her family or her fortune."

"No, to be sure not," said the squire, rousing up. "My wits had gone far afield, and I'll own I was only thinking what a pity it was she wouldn't do for Osborne. But of course it's out of the question—out of the question."

"Yes," said Mr. Gibson, "and if you will excuse me, squire, I really must go now, and then you'll be at liberty to send your wits afield uninterrupted." This time he was at the door before the squire called him back. He stood impatiently hitting his top-boots with his riding-whip, waiting for the interminable last words.

"I say, Gibson, we're old friends, and you're a fool if you take anything I say as an offence. Madam your wife and I didn't hit it off the only time I ever saw her. I won't say she was silly, but I think one of us was silly, and it wasn't me. However, we'll pass that over. Suppose you bring her, and this girl Cynthia (which is as outlandish a Christian name as I'd wish to hear), and little Molly out here to lunch some day,—I'm more at my ease in my own house,—and I'm more sure to be civil, too. We need say nothing about Roger,—neither the lass nor me,—and you keep your wife's tongue quiet, if you can. It will only be like a compliment to you on your marriage, you know—and no one must take it for anything more. Mind, no allusion or mention of Roger, and this piece of folly. I shall see the girl then, and I can judge her for myself; for, as you say, that will be the best plan. Osborne will be here too; and he's always in his element talking to women. I sometimes think he's half a woman himself, he spends so much money and is so unreasonable."

The squire was pleased with his own speech and his own thought, and smiled a little as he finished speaking. Mr. Gibson was both pleased and amused; and he smiled too, anxious as he was to be gone. The next Thursday was soon fixed upon as the day on which Mr. Gibson was to bring his womenkind out to the Hall. He thought that on the whole the interview had gone off a good deal better than he expected, and felt rather proud of the invitation of which he was the bearer. Therefore Mrs. Gibson's manner of receiving it was an annoyance to him. She meanwhile had been considering herself as an injured woman ever since the evening of the day of Roger's departure; what business had any one had to speak as if the chances of Osborne's life being prolonged were

infinitely small, if in fact the matter was uncertain? She liked Osborne extremely, much better than Roger; and would gladly have schemed to secure him for Cynthia, if she had not shrunk from the notion of her daughter's becoming a widow. For if Mrs. Gibson had ever felt anything acutely it was the death of Mr. Kirkpatrick; and, amiably callous as she was in most things, she recoiled from exposing her daughter wilfully to the same kind of suffering which she herself had experienced. But if she had only known Dr. Nicholls' opinion she would never have favoured Roger's suit; never. And then Mr. Gibson himself; why was he so cold and reserved in his treatment of her since that night of explanation? She had done nothing wrong; yet she was treated as though she were in disgrace. And everything about the house was flat just now. She even missed the little excitement of Roger's visits, and the watching of his attentions to Cynthia. Cynthia too was silent enough; and as for Molly, she was absolutely dull and out of spirits, a state of mind so annoying to Mrs. Gibson just now, that she vented some of her discontent upon the poor girl, from whom she feared neither complaint nor repartee.

CHAPTER VII.

DOMESTIC DIPLOMACY.

The evening of the day on which Mr. Gibson had been to see the squire, the three women were alone in the drawing-room, for Mr. Gibson had had a long round and was not as yet come in. They had had to wait dinner for him; and for some time after his return there was nothing done or said but what related to the necessary business of eating. Mr. Gibson was, perhaps, as well satisfied with his day's work as any of the four; for this visit to the squire had been weighing on his mind ever since he heard of the state of things between Roger and Cynthia. He did not like the having to go and tell of a love-affair so soon after he had declared his belief that no such thing existed; it was a confession of fallibility which is distasteful to most men. If the squire had not been of so unsuspicious and simple a nature, he might have drawn his own conclusions from the apparent concealment of facts, and felt doubtful of Mr. Gibson's perfect honesty in the business; but being what he was, there was no danger of such unjust misapprehension. Still Mr. Gibson knew the hot hasty temper he had to deal with, and had expected more violence of language than he really encountered; and the last arrangement by which Cynthia, her mother, and Molly—who, as Mr. Gibson thought to himself, and smiled at the thought, was sure to be a peacemaker, and a sweetener of intercourse—were to go to the Hall and make acquaintance with the squire, appeared like a great success to Mr. Gibson, for achieving which he took not a little credit to himself. Altogether, he was more cheerful and bland than he had been for many days; and when he came up into the drawing-room for a few minutes after dinner, before going out again to see his town-patients, he whistled a little under his breath, as he stood with his

back to the fire, looking at Cynthia, and thinking that he had not done her justice when describing her to the squire. Now this soft, almost tuneless whistling, was to Mr. Gibson what purring is to a cat. He could no more have done it with an anxious case on his mind, or when he was annoyed by human folly, or when he was hungry, than he could have flown through the air. Molly knew all this by instinct, and was happy without being aware of it, as soon as she heard the low whistle which was no music after all. But Mrs. Gibson did not like this trick of her husband's; it was not refined she thought, not even "artistic;" if she could have called it by this fine word it would have compensated her for the want of refinement. To-night it was particularly irritating to her nerves; but since her conversation with Mr. Gibson about Cynthia's engagement, she had not felt herself in a sufficiently good position to complain.

Mr. Gibson began,—"Well, Cynthia; I've seen the squire to-day, and made a clean breast of it."

Cynthia looked up quickly, questioning with her eyes; Molly stopped her netting to listen; no one spoke.

"You're all to go there on Thursday to lunch; he asked you all, and I promised for you."

Still no reply; natural, perhaps, but very flat.

"You'll be glad of that, Cynthia, shan't you?" asked Mr. Gibson. "It may be a little formidable, but I hope it will be the beginning of a good understanding between you."

"Thank you!" said she, with an effort. "But—but won't it make it public? I do so wish not to have it known, or talked about, not till he comes back or close upon the marriage."

"I don't see how it should make it public," said Mr. Gibson. "My wife goes to lunch with my friend, and takes her daughters with her—there's nothing in that, is there?"

"I am not sure that I shall go," put in Mrs. Gibson. She did not know why she said it, for she fully intended to go all the time; but having said it, she was bound to stick to it for awhile; and, with such a husband as hers, the hard necessity was sure to fall upon her of having to find a reason for her saying. Then it came quick and sharp.

"Why not?" said he, turning round upon her.

"Oh, because—because I think he ought to have called on Cynthia first; I've that sort of sensitiveness I can't bear to think of her being slighted because she is poor."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Gibson. "I do assure you, no slight whatever was intended. He does not wish to speak about the engagement to any one—not even to Osborne—that's your wish, too, is it not, Cynthia? Nor does he intend to mention it to any of you when you go there; but, naturally enough, he wants to make acquaintance with his future daughter-in-law. If he deviated so much from his usual course as to come calling here ——"

"I am sure I don't want him to come calling here," said Mrs. Gibson, interrupting. "He was not so very agreeable the only time he did come. But I am that sort of a character that I cannot put up with any neglect of persons I love, just because they are not smiled upon by fortune." She sighed a little ostentatiously as she ended her sentence.

"Well, then, you won't go!" said Mr. Gibson, provoked, but not wishing to have a long discussion, especially as he felt his temper going.

"Do you wish it, Cynthia?" said Mrs. Gibson, anxious for an excuse to yield.

But her daughter was quite aware of this motive for the question, and replied quietly,—"Not particularly, mamma. I am quite willing to refuse the invitation."

"It is already accepted," said Mr. Gibson, almost ready to vow that he would never again meddle in any affair in which women were concerned, which would effectually shut him out from all love-affairs for the future. He had been touched by the squire's relenting, pleased with what he had thought would give others pleasure, and this was the end of it!

"Oh, do go, Cynthia!" said Molly, pleading with her eyes as well as her words. "Do; I am sure you will like the squire; and it is such a pretty place, and he'll be so much disappointed."

"I should not like to give up my dignity," said Cynthia," demurely. "And you heard what mamma said!"

It was very malicious of her. She fully intended to go, and was equally sure that her mother was already planning her dress for the occasion in her own mind. Mr. Gibson, however, who, surgeon though he was, had never learnt to anatomize a woman's heart, took it all literally, and was excessively angry both with Cynthia and her mother; so angry that he did not dare to trust himself to speak. He went quickly to the door, intending to leave the room; but his wife's voice arrested him; she said,—

"My dear, do you wish me to go; if you do, I will put my own feelings on one side?"

"Of course I do!" he said, short and stern, and left the room.

"Then I'll go!" said she, in the voice of a victim—those words were meant for him, but he hardly heard them. "And we'll have a fly from the 'George,' and get a livery-coat for Thomas, which I've long been wanting, only dear Mr. Gibson did not like it, but on an occasion like this I'm sure he won't mind; and Thomas shall go on the box, and ——"

"But, mamma, I've my feelings too," said Cynthia.

"Nonsense, child! when all is so nicely arranged too."

So they went on the day appointed. Mr. Gibson was aware of the change of plans, and that they were going after all; but he was so much annoyed by the manner in which his wife had received an invitation which had appeared to him so much kinder than he had expected from his previous knowledge of the squire, and his wishes on the subject of his son's marriage, that Mrs. Gibson heard neither interest nor curiosity expressed by her husband as to the visit itself, or the reception they met with. Cynthia's indifference as to whether the invitation was accepted or not had displeased Mr. Gibson. He was not up to her ways with her mother, and did not understand how much of this said indifference had been assumed in order to countervent Mrs. Gibson's affectation and false sentiment. But for all his annoyance on the subject, he was, in fact, very curious to know how the visit had gone off, and took the first opportunity of being alone with Molly to question her about the lunch of the day before at Hamley Hall.

"And so you went to Hamley yesterday after all?"

"Yes; I thought you would have come. The squire seemed quite to expect you."

"I thought of going there at first; but I changed my mind like other people. I don't see why women are to have a monopoly of changeableness. Well! how did it go off? Pleasantly, I suppose, for both your mother and Cynthia were in high spirits last night."

"Yes. The dear old squire was in his best dress and on his best behaviour, and was so prettily attentive to Cynthia, and she looked so lovely, walking about with him, and listening to all his talk about the garden and farm. Mamma was tired, and stopped indoors, so they got on very well, and saw a great deal of each other."

"And my little girl trotted behind?"

"Oh, yes. You know I was almost at home, and besides—of course ——" Molly went very red, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Do you think she's worthy of him?" asked her father, just as if she had completed her speech.

"Of Roger, papa? oh, who is? But she is very sweet, and very, very charming."

"Very charming if you will, but somehow I don't quite understand her. Why does she want all this secrecy? Why was she not more eager to go and pay her duty to Roger's father? She took it as coolly as if I'd asked her to go to church?"

"I don't think she did take it coolly; I believe I don't quite understand her either, but I love her dearly all the same."

"Umph; I like to understand people thoroughly, but I know it's not necessary to women. D'ye really think she's worthy of him?"

"Oh, papa" — said Molly, and then she stopped; she wanted to speak in favour of Cynthia, but somehow she could form no reply that pleased her to this repeated inquiry. He did not seem much to care if he got an answer or not, for he went on with his own thoughts, and the result was that he asked Molly if Cynthia had heard from Roger.

"Yes; on Wednesday morning."

"Did she show it to you? But of course not. Besides, I read the squire's letter, which told all about him."

Now Cynthia, rather to Molly's surprise, had told her that she might read the letter if she liked, and Molly had shrunk from availing herself of the permission, for Roger's sake. She thought that he would probably have poured out his heart to the one sole person, and that it was not fair to listen, as it were, to his confidences.

"Was Osborne at home?" asked Mr. Gibson. "The squire said he did not think he would have come back; but the young fellow is so uncertain ——"

"No, he was still from home." Then Molly blushed all over crimson, for it suddenly struck her that Osborne was probably with his wife—that mysterious wife, of whose existence she was cognizant, but of whom she knew so little, and of whom her father knew nothing. Mr. Gibson noticed the blush with anxiety. What did

it mean? It was troublesome enough to find that one of the squire's precious sons had fallen in love within the prohibited ranks; and what would not have to be said and done if anything fresh were to come out between Osborne and Molly. He spoke out at once to relieve himself of this new apprehension.

"Molly, I was taken by surprise by this affair between Cynthia and Roger Hamley—if there's anything more on the tapis let me know at once, honestly and openly. I know it's an awkward question for you to reply to; but I would not ask it unless I had good reasons." He took her hand as he spoke. She looked up at him with clear, truthful eyes, which filled with tears as she spoke. She did not know why the tears came; perhaps it was because she was not so strong as formerly.

"If you mean that you're afraid that Osborne thinks of me as Roger thinks of Cynthia, papa, you are quite mistaken. Osborne and I are friends and nothing more, and never can be anything more. That's all I can tell you."

"It's quite enough, little one. It's a great relief. I don't want to have my Molly carried off by any young man just yet; I should miss her sadly." He could not help saying this in the fulness of his heart just then, but he was surprised at the effect these few tender words produced. Molly threw her arms round his neck, and began to sob bitterly, her head lying on his shoulder. "There, there!" said he, patting her on the back, and leading her to the sofa, "that will do. I get quite enough of tears in the day, shed for real causes, not to want them at home, where, I hope, they are shed for no cause at all. There's nothing really the matter, is there, my dear?" he continued, holding her a little away from him that he might look in her face. She smiled at him through her tears; and he did not see the look of sadness which returned to her face after he had left her.

"Nothing, dear, dear papa—nothing now. It is such a comfort to have you all to myself—it makes me happy."

Mr. Gibson knew all implied in these words, and felt that there was no effectual help for the state of things which had arisen from his own act. It was better for them both that they should not speak out more fully. So he kissed her, and said,—

"That's right, dear! I can leave you in comfort now, and indeed I've stayed too long already gossiping. Go out and have a walk—take Cynthia with you, if you like. I must be off. Good-by, little one."

His commonplace words acted like an astringent on Molly's relaxed feelings. He intended that they should do so; it was the truest kindness to her; but he walked away from her with a sharp pang at his heart, which he turned into numbness as soon as he could by throwing himself violently into the affairs and cares of others.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FLUKE, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

The honour and glory of having a lover of her own was soon to fall to Molly's share ; though, to be sure, it was a little deduction to the honour that the man who came with the full intention of proposing to her, ended by making Cynthia an offer. It was Mr. Coxe, who came back to Hollingford to follow out the purpose he had announced to Mr. Gibson nearly two years before, of inducing Molly to become his wife as soon as he should have succeeded to his uncle's estate. He was now a rich, though still a red-haired, young man. He came to the George Inn, bringing his horses and his groom ; not that he was going to ride much, but that he thought that such outward signs of his riches might help on his suit; and he was so justly modest in his estimation of himself that he believed that he needed all extraneous aid. He piqued himself on his constancy; and indeed considering that he had been so much restrained by his duty, his affection, and his expectations to his crabbed old uncle, that he had not been able to go much into society, and very rarely indeed into the company of young ladies, such fidelity to Molly was very meritorious, at least in his own eyes. Mr. Gibson too was touched by it, and made it a point of honour to give him a fair field, all the time sincerely hoping that Molly would not be such a goose as to lend a willing ear to a youth who could never remember the difference between apophysis and epiphysis. He thought it as well not to tell his wife more of Mr. Coxe's antecedents than that he had been a former pupil; who had relinquished (all that he knew of, understood) the medical profession because an old uncle had left him enough of money to be idle. Mrs. Gibson, who felt that she had somehow lost her place in her husband's favour, took it into her head that she could reinstate herself if she was successful in finding a good match

for his daughter Molly. She knew that he had forbidden her to try for this end, as distinctly as words could express a meaning; but her own words so seldom did express her meaning, or if they did, she held to her opinions so loosely, that she had no idea but that it was the same with other people. Accordingly she gave Mr. Coxe a very sweet and gracious welcome.

"It is such a pleasure to me to make acquaintance with the former pupils of my husband. He has spoken to me so often of you that I quite feel as if you were one of the family, as indeed I am sure that Mr. Gibson considers you."

Mr. Coxe felt much flattered, and took the words as a happy omen for his love-affair. "Is Miss Gibson in?" asked he, blushing violently. "I knew her formerly, that is to say, I lived in the same house with her, for more than two years, and it would be a great pleasure to—to——"

"Certainly, I am sure she will be so glad to see you. I sent her and Cynthia—you don't know my daughter Cynthia I think, Mr. Coxe? she and Molly are such great friends—out for a brisk walk this frosty day, but I think they will soon come back." She went on saying agreeable nothings to the young man, who received her attentions with a certain complacency, but was all the time much more engaged in listening to the well-remembered click at the front door,—the shutting it to again with household care, and the sound of the familiar bounding footstep on the stair. At last they came. Cynthia entered first, bright and blooming, fresh colour in her cheeks and lips, fresh brilliance in her eyes. She looked startled at the sight of a stranger, and for an instant she stopped short at the door, as if taken by surprise. Then in came Molly softly behind her, smiling, happy, dimpled; but not such a glowing beauty as Cynthia.

"Oh, Mr. Coxe, is it you?" said she, going up to him with an outstretched hand, and greeting him with simple friendliness.

"Yes; it seems such a long time since I saw you. You are so much grown—so much—well, I suppose I must not say what," he replied, speaking hurriedly, and holding her hand all the time rather to her discomfiture. Then Mrs. Gibson introduced her daughter, and the two girls spoke of the enjoyment of their walk. Mr. Coxe marred his cause in that very first interview, if indeed he ever could have had any chance, by his precipitancy in showing his feelings, and Mrs. Gibson helped him to mar it by trying to

assist him. Molly lost her open friendliness of manner, and began to shrink away from him in a way which he thought was a very ungrateful return for all his faithfulness to her these two years past; and after all she was not the wonderful beauty his fancy or his love had painted her. That Miss Kirkpatrick was far more beautiful and much easier of access. For Cynthia put on all her pretty airs—her look of intent interest in what any one was saying to her, let the subject be what it would, as if it was the thing she cared the most about in the whole world; her unspoken deference; in short, all the unconscious ways she possessed by instinct of tickling the vanity of men. So while Molly quietly repelled him, Cynthia drew him to her by her soft attractive ways; and his constancy fell before her charms. He was thankful that he had not gone too far with Molly, and grateful to Mr. Gibson for having prohibited all declarations two years ago. For Cynthia, and Cynthia alone, could make him happy. After a fortnight's time, during which he had entirely veered round in his allegiance, he thought it desirable to speak to Mr. Gibson. He did so with a certain sense of exultation in his own correct behaviour in the affair, but at the same time feeling rather ashamed of the confession of his own changeableness which was naturally involved. Now it had so happened that Mr. Gibson had been unusually little at home during the fortnight that Mr. Coxe had ostensibly lodged at the George, but in reality had spent the greater part of his time at Mr. Gibson's—so that he had seen very little of his former pupil, and on the whole he had thought him improved, especially after Molly's manner had made her father pretty sure that Mr. Coxe stood no chance in that quarter. But Mr. Gibson was quite ignorant of the attraction which Cynthia had had for the young man. If he had perceived it he would have nipped it in the bud pretty quickly, for he had no notion of any girl, even though only partially engaged to one man, receiving offers from others, if a little plain speaking could prevent it. Mr. Coxe had asked for a private interview; they were sitting in the old surgery, now called the consulting-room, but still retaining so much of its former self as to be the last place in which Mr. Coxe could feel himself at ease. He was red up to the very roots of his red hair, and kept turning his glossy new hat round and round in his fingers, unable to find out the proper way of beginning his sentence, so at length he plunged in, grammar or no grammar.

"Mr. Gibson, I daresay you'll be surprised, I'm sure I am at—

at what I want to say; but I think it's the part of an honourable man, as you said yourself, sir, a year or two ago, to—to speak to the father first, and as you, sir, stand in the place of a father to Miss Kirkpatrick, I should like to express my feelings, my hopes, or perhaps I should say wishes, in short——"

"Miss Kirkpatrick?" said Mr. Gibson, a good deal surprised.

"Yes, sir!" continued Mr. Coxe, rushing on now he had got so far. "I know it may appear inconstant and changeable, but I do assure you, I came here with a heart as faithful to your daughter, as ever beat in a man's bosom. I most fully intended to offer myself and all that I had to her acceptance before I left; but really, sir, if you had seen her manner to me every time I endeavoured to press my suit a little—it was more than coy, it was absolutely repellent, there could be no mistaking it,—while Miss Kirkpatrick——" he looked modestly down, and smoothed the nap of his hat, smiling a little while he did so.

"While Miss Kirkpatrick——?" repeated Mr. Gibson, in such a stern voice, that Mr. Coxe, landed esquire as he was now, felt as much discomfited as he used to do when he was an apprentice, and Mr. Gibson had spoken to him in a similar manner.

"I was only going to say, sir, that so far as one can judge from manner, and willingness to listen, and apparent pleasure in my visits—altogether, I think I may venture to hope that Miss Kirkpatrick is not quite indifferent to me,—and I would wait,—you have no objection, have you, sir, to my speaking to her, I mean?" said Mr. Coxe, a little anxious at the expression on Mr. Gibson's face. "I do assure you I haven't a chance with Miss Gibson," he continued, not knowing what to say, and fancying that his inconstancy was rankling in Mr. Gibson's mind.

"No! I don't suppose you have. Don't go and fancy it is that which is annoying me. You're mistaken about Miss Kirkpatrick, however. I don't believe she could ever have meant to give you encouragement!"

Mr. Coxe's face grew perceptibly paler. His feelings, if evanescent, were evidently strong.

"I think, sir, if you could have seen her—I don't consider myself vain, and manner is so difficult to describe. At any rate, you can have no objection to my taking my chance, and speaking to her."

"Of course, if you won't be convinced otherwise, I can have no

objection. But if you'll take my advice, you will spare yourself the pain of a refusal. I may, perhaps, be trenching on confidence, but I think I ought to tell you that her affections are otherwise engaged."

"It cannot be!" said Mr. Coxe. "Mr. Gibson, there must be some mistake. I have gone as far as I dared in expressing my feelings, and her manner has been most gracious. I don't think she could have misunderstood my meaning. Perhaps she has changed her mind? It is possible that, after consideration, she has learnt to prefer another, is it not?"

"By 'another,' you mean yourself, I suppose. I can believe in such inconstancy" (he could not help, in his own mind, giving a slight sneer at the instance before him), "but I should be very sorry to think that Miss Kirkpatrick could be guilty of it."

"But she may—it is a chance. Will you allow me to see her?"

"Certainly, my poor fellow"—for, intermingled with a little contempt, was a good deal of respect for the simplicity, the unworldliness, the strength of feeling, even though the feeling was evanescent.—"I will send her to you directly."

"Thank you, sir. God bless you for a kind friend!"

Mr. Gibson went upstairs to the drawing-room, where he was pretty sure he should find Cynthia. There she was, as bright and careless as usual, making up a bonnet for her mother, and chattering to Molly as she worked.

"Cynthia, you will oblige me by going down into my consulting-room at once. Mr. Coxe wants to speak to you!"

"Mr. Coxe?" said Cynthia. "What can he want with me?"

Evidently, she answered her own question as soon as it was asked, for she coloured, and avoided meeting Mr. Gibson's severe, uncompromising look. As soon as she had left the room, Mr. Gibson sat down, and took up a new *Edinburgh* lying on the table, as an excuse for conversation. Was there anything in the article that made him say, after a minute or two, to Molly, who sat silent and wondering—

"Molly, you must never trifle with the love of an honest man. You don't know what pain you may give."

Presently Cynthia came back into the drawing-room, looking very much confused. Most likely she would not have returned if she had known that Mr. Gibson was still there; but it was such an unheard-of thing for him to be sitting in that room in the middle of the day, reading or making pretence to read, that she had never

thought of his remaining. He looked up at her the moment she came in, so that there was nothing for it but putting a bold face on it, and going back to her work.

"Is Mr. Coxe still downstairs?" asked Mr. Gibson.

"No. He is gone. He asked me to give you both his kind regards. I believe he is leaving this afternoon." Cynthia tried to make her manner as commonplace as possible; but she did not look up, and her voice trembled a little.

Mr. Gibson went on looking at his book for a few minutes; but Cynthia felt that more was coming, and only wished it would come quickly, for the severe silence was very hard to bear. It came at last.

"I trust this will never occur again, Cynthia!" said he, in grave displeasure. "I should not feel satisfied with the conduct of any girl, however free, who could receive marked attentions from a young man with complacency, and so lead him on to make an offer which she never meant to accept. But what must I think of a young woman in your position, engaged — yet 'accepting most graciously,' for that was the way Coxe expressed it—the overtures of another man? Do you consider what unnecessary pain you have given him by your thoughtless behaviour? I call it thoughtless, but it is the mildest epithet I can apply to it. I beg that such a thing may not occur again, or I shall be obliged to characterize it more severely."

Molly could not imagine what "more severely" could be, for her father's manner appeared to her almost cruel in its sternness. Cynthia coloured up extremely, then went pale, and at length raised her beautiful appealing eyes full of tears to Mr. Gibson. He was touched by that look, but he resolved immediately not to be mollified by any of her physical charms of expression, but to keep to his sober judgment of her conduct.

"Please, Mr. Gibson, hear my side of the story before you speak so hardly to me. I did not mean to—to flirt. I merely meant to make myself agreeable,—I can't help doing that,—and that goose of a Mr. Coxe seems to have fancied I meant to give him encouragement."

"Do you mean that you were not aware that he was falling in love with you?" Mr. Gibson was melting into a readiness to be convinced by that sweet voice and pleading face.

"Well, I suppose I must speak truly." Cynthia blushed and

"I TRUST THIS WILL NEVER OCCUR AGAIN, CYNTHIA!"

smiled—ever so little—but it was a smile, and it hardened Mr. Gibson's heart again. "I did think once or twice that he was becoming a little more complimentary than the occasion required; but I hate throwing cold water on people, and I never thought he could take it into his silly head to fancy himself seriously in love, and to make such a fuss at the last, after only a fortnight's acquaintance."

"You seem to have been pretty well aware of his silliness (I should rather call it simplicity). Don't you think you should have remembered that it might lead him to exaggerate what you were doing and saying into encouragement?"

"Perhaps. I daresay I'm all wrong, and he's all right," said Cynthia, piqued and pouting. "We used to say in France, that '*les absens ont toujours tort*,' but really it seems as if here——" she stopped. She was unwilling to be impertinent to a man whom she respected and liked. She took up another point of her defence, and rather made matters worse. "Besides, Roger would not allow me to consider myself as finally engaged to him; I would willingly have done it, but he would not let me."

"Nonsense. Don't let us go on talking about it, Cynthia! I've said all I mean to say. I believe that you were only thoughtless, as I told you before. But don't let it happen again." He left the room at once, to put a stop to the conversation, the continuance of which would serve no useful purpose, and perhaps end by irritating him.

"Not guilty, but we recommend the prisoner not to do it again. It's pretty much that, isn't it, Molly?" said Cynthia, letting her tears downfall, even while she smiled. "I do believe your father might make a good woman of me yet, if he would only take the pains, and wasn't quite so severe. And to think of that stupid little fellow making all this mischief! He pretended to take it to heart, as if he had loved me for years instead of only for days. I daresay only for hours if the truth were told."

"I was afraid he was becoming very fond of you," said Molly; "at least it struck me once or twice; but I knew he could not stay long, and I thought it would only make you uncomfortable if I said anything about it. But now I wish I had!"

"It wouldn't have made a bit of difference," replied Cynthia. "I knew he liked me, and I like to be liked; it's born in me to try to make every one I come near fond of me; but then they shouldn't

carry it too far, for it becomes very troublesome if they do. I shall hate red-haired people for the rest of my life. 'To think of such a man as that being the cause of your father's displeasure with me!"

Molly had a question at her tongue's end that she longed to put; she knew it was indiscreet, but at last out it came almost against her will.

"Shall you tell Roger about it?"

Cynthia replied, "I've not thought about it—no! I don't think I shall—there's no need. Perhaps, if we are ever married ——"

"Ever married!" said Molly, under her breath. But Cynthia took no notice of the exclamation until she had finished the sentence which it interrupted.

"—— and I can see his face and know his mood, I may tell it him then; but not in writing, and when he is absent; it might annoy him."

"I am afraid it would make him uncomfortable," said Molly, simply. "And yet it must be so pleasant to be able to tell him everything—all your difficulties and troubles."

"Yes; only I don't worry him with these things; it is better to write him merry letters, and cheer him up among the black folk. You repeated 'Ever married,' a little while ago; do you know, Molly, I don't think I ever shall be married to him? I don't know why, but I have a strong presentiment, so it's just as well not to tell him all my secrets, for it would be awkward for him to know them if it never came off!"

Molly dropped her work, and sat silent, looking into the future; at length she said, "I think it would break his heart, Cynthia!"

"Nonsense. Why, I'm sure that Mr. Coxe came here with the intention of falling in love with you—you need not blush so violently. I'm sure you saw it as plainly as I did, only you made yourself disagreeable, and I took pity on him, and consoled his wounded vanity."

"Can you—do you dare to compare Roger Hamley to Mr. Coxe?" asked Molly, indignantly.

"No, no, I don't!" said Cynthia in a moment. "They are as different as men can be. Don't be so dreadfully serious over everything, Molly. You look as oppressed with sad reproach, as if I had been passing on to you the scolding your father gave me."

"Because I don't think you value Roger as you ought, Cynthia!" said Molly stoutly, for it required a good deal of courage to force

herself to say this, although she could not tell why she shrank so from speaking.

"Yes, I do! It's not in my nature to go into ecstasies, and I don't suppose I shall ever be what people call 'in love.' But I am glad he loves me, and I like to make him happy, and I think him the best and most agreeable man I know, always excepting your father when he isn't angry with me. What can I say more, Molly? would you like me to say I think him handsome?"

"I know most people think him plain, but ——"

"Well, I'm of the opinion of most people then, and small blame to them. But I like his face—oh, ten thousand times better than Mr. Preston's handsomeness!" For the first time during the conversation Cynthia seemed thoroughly in earnest. Why Mr. Preston was introduced neither she nor Molly knew; it came up and out by a sudden impulse; but a fierce look came into the eyes, and the soft lips contracted themselves as Cynthia named his name. Molly had noticed this look before, always at the mention of this one person.

"Cynthia, what makes you dislike Mr. Preston so much?"

"Don't you? Why do you ask me? and yet, Molly," said she, suddenly relaxing into depression, not merely in tone and look, but in the droop of her limbs—"Molly, what should you think of me if I married him after all?"

"Married him. Has he ever asked you?" But Cynthia, instead of replying to this question, went on, uttering her own thoughts.

"More unlikely things have happened. Have you never heard of strong wills mesmerizing weaker ones into submission? One of the girls at Madame Lefebre's went out as a governess to a Russian family, who lived near Moscow. I sometimes think I'll write to her to find me a situation in Russia, just to get out of the daily chance of seeing that man!"

"But sometimes you seem quite intimate with him, and talk to him ——"

"How can I help it?" said Cynthia impatiently. Then recovering herself she added: "We knew him so well at Ashcombe, and he's not a man to be easily thrown off, I can tell you. I must be civil to him; it's not from liking, and he knows it is not, for I've told him so. However, we won't talk about him. I don't know how we came to do it, I'm sure: the mere fact of his existence,

and of his being within half a mile of us, is bad enough. Oh! I wish Roger was at home, and rich, and could marry me at once, and carry me away from that man! If I'd thought of it, I really believe I would have taken poor red-haired Mr. Coxe."

"I don't understand it at all," said Molly. "I dislike Mr. Preston, but I should never think of taking such violent steps as you speak of, to get away from the neighbourhood in which he lives."

"No, because you are a reasonable little darling," said Cynthia, resuming her usual manner, and coming up to Molly, and kissing her. "At least you'll acknowledge I'm a good hater!"

"Yes. But still I don't understand it."

"Oh, never mind! There are old complications with our affairs at Ashcombe. Money matters are at the root of it all. Horrid poverty—do let us talk of something else! Or, better still, let me go and finish my letter to Roger, or I shall be too late for the African mail!"

"Is it not gone? Oh, I ought to have reminded you! It will be too late. Did you not see the notice at the post-office that letters ought to be in London on the morning of the 10th instead of the evening. Oh, I am so sorry!"

"So am I, but it can't be helped. It is to be hoped it will be the greater treat when he does get it. I've a far greater weight on my heart, because your father seems so displeased with me. I was fond of him, and now he is making me quite a coward. You see, Molly," continued she, a little piteously, "I've never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before; and I don't quite know how to behave."

"You must learn," said Molly tenderly. "You'll find Roger quite as strict in his notions of right and wrong."

"Ah, but he's in love with me!" said Cynthia, with a pretty consciousness of her power. Molly turned away her head, and was silent; it was of no use combating the truth, and she tried rather not to feel it—not to feel, poor girl, that she too had a great weight on her heart, into the cause of which she shrank from examining. That whole winter long she had felt as if her sun was all shrouded over with grey mist, and could no longer shine brightly for her. She wakened up in the morning with a dull sense of something being wrong—the world was out of joint, and, if she were born to set it right, she did not know how to do it. Blind herself as she would, she could not help perceiving that her father was not satisfied

with the wife he had chosen. For a long time Molly had been surprised at his apparent contentment; sometimes she had been unselfish enough to be glad that he was satisfied; but still more frequently nature would have its way, and she was almost irritated at what she considered his blindness. Something, however, had changed him now: something that had arisen at the time of Cynthia's engagement; he had become nervously sensitive to his wife's failings, and his whole manner had grown dry and sarcastic, not merely to her, but sometimes to Cynthia,—and even—but this very rarely, to Molly herself. He was not a man to go into passions, or ebullitions of feeling: they would have relieved him, even while degrading him in his own eyes; but he became hard, and occasionally bitter in his speeches and ways. Molly now learnt to long after the vanished blindness in which her father had passed the first year of his marriage; yet there were no outrageous infractions of domestic peace. Some people might say that Mr. Gibson "accepted the inevitable;" he told himself in more homely phrase "that it was no use crying over spilt milk:" and he, from principle, avoided all actual dissensions with his wife, preferring to cut short a discussion by a sarcasm, or by leaving the room. Moreover, Mrs. Gibson had a very tolerable temper of her own, and her cat-like nature purred and delighted in smooth ways, and pleasant quietness. She had no great facility for understanding sarcasm; it is true it disturbed her, but as she was not quick at deciphering any depth of meaning, and felt it to be unpleasant to think about it, she forgot it as soon as possible. Yet she saw she was often in some kind of disfavour with her husband, and it made her uneasy. She resembled Cynthia in this: she liked to be liked; and she wanted to regain the esteem which she did not perceive she had lost for ever. Molly sometimes took her stepmother's part in secret; she felt as if she herself could never have borne her father's hard speeches so patiently; they would have cut her to the heart, and she must either have demanded an explanation, and probed the sore to the bottom, or sat down despairing and miserable. Instead of which Mrs. Gibson, after her husband had left the room, on these occasions would say in a manner more bewildered than hurt—

"I think dear papa seems a little put out to-day; we must see that he has a dinner that he likes when he comes home. I have often perceived that everything depends on making a man comfortable in his own house."

And thus she went on, groping about to find the means of rein-

stating herself in his good graces—really trying, according to her lights, till Molly was often compelled to pity her in spite of herself, and although she saw that her stepmother was the cause of her father's increased astringency of disposition. For indeed he had got into that kind of exaggerated susceptibility with regard to his wife's faults, which may be best typified by the state of bodily irritation that is produced by the constant recurrence of any particular noise: those who are brought within hearing of it, are apt to be always on the watch for the repetition, if they are once made to notice it, and are in an irritable state of nerves.

So that poor Molly had not passed a cheerful winter, independently of any private sorrows that she might have in her own heart. She did not look well, either: she was gradually falling into low health, rather than bad health. Her heart beat more feebly and slower, the vivifying stimulant of hope—even unacknowledged hope—was gone out of her life. It seemed as if there was not, and never could be in this world, any help for the dumb discordancy between her father and his wife. Day after day, month after month, year after year, would Molly have to sympathize with her father, and pity her stepmother, feeling acutely for both, and certainly more than Mrs. Gibson felt for herself. Molly could not imagine how she had at one time wished for her father's eyes to be opened, and how she could ever have fancied that if they were, he would be able to change things in Mrs. Gibson's character. It was all hopeless, and the only attempt at a remedy was to think about it as little as possible. Then Cynthia's ways and manners about Roger gave Molly a great deal of uneasiness. She did not believe that Cynthia cared enough for him; at any rate, not with the sort of love that she herself would have bestowed, if she had been so happy—no, that was not it—if she had been in Cynthia's place. She felt as if she should have gone to him both hands held out, full and brimming over with tenderness, and been grateful for every word of precious confidence bestowed on her. Yet Cynthia received his letters with a kind of carelessness, and read them with a strange indifference, while Molly sat at her feet, so to speak, looking up with eyes as wistful as a dog's waiting for crumbs, and such chance beneficences.

"She tried to be patient on these occasions, but at last she must ask—"Where is he, Cynthia? What does he say?" By this time Cynthia had put down the letter on the table by her, smiling

a little from time to time, as she remembered the loving compliments it contained.

"Where? Oh, I did not look exactly—somewhere in Abyssinia —Huon. I can't read the word, and it doesn't much signify, for it would give me no idea."

"Is he well?" asked greedy Molly.

"Yes, now. He has had a slight touch of fever, he says; but it's all over now, and he hopes he is getting acclimatized."

"Of fever!—and who took care of him? he would want nursing, —and so far from home. Oh, Cynthia!"

"Oh, I don't fancy he had any nursing, poor fellow! One doesn't expect nursing, and hospitals, and doctors in Abyssinia; but he had plenty of quinine with him, and I suppose that is the best specific. At any rate he says he is quite well now!"

Molly sat silent for a minute or two.

"What is the date of the letter, Cynthia?"

"I didn't look. December the—December the 10th."

"That's nearly two months ago," said Molly.

"Yes; but I determined I would not worry myself with useless anxiety, when he went away. If anything did—go wrong, you know," said Cynthia, using a euphuism for death, as most people do (it is an ugly word to speak plain out in the midst of life), "it would be all over before I even heard of his illness, and I could be of no use to him—could I, Molly?"

"No. I daresay it is all very true; only I should think the squire could not take it so easily."

"I always write him a little note when I hear from Roger, but I don't think I'll name this touch of fever—shall I, Molly."

"I don't know," said Molly. "People say one ought, but I almost wish I hadn't heard it. Please, does he say anything else that I may hear?"

"Oh, lovers' letters are so silly, and I think this is sillier than usual," said Cynthia, looking over her letter again. "Here's a piece you may read, from that line to that," indicating two places. "I haven't read it myself for it looked dullish—all about Aristotle and Pliny—and I want to get this bonnet-cap made up before we go out to pay our calls."

Molly took the letter, the thought crossing her mind that he had touched it, had had his hands upon it, in those far distant desert lands, where he might be lost to sight and to any human

knowledge of his fate; even now her pretty brown fingers almost caressed the flimsy paper with their delicacy of touch as she read. She saw references made to books, which, with a little trouble, would be accessible to her here in Hollingford. Perhaps the details and the references would make the letter dull and dry to some people, but not to her, thanks to his former teaching and the interest he had excited in her for his pursuits. But, as he said in apology, what had he to write about in that savage land, but his love, and his researches, and travels? There was no society, no gaiety, no new books to write about, no gossip in Abyssinian wilds.

Molly was not in strong health, and perhaps this made her a little fanciful; but certain it is that her thoughts by day and her dreams by night were haunted by the idea of Roger lying ill and untended in those savage lands. Her constant prayer, "O my Lord! give her the living child, and in no wise slay it," came from a heart as true as that of the real mother in King Solomon's judgment. "Let him live, let him live, even though I may never set eyes upon him again. Have pity upon his father! Grant that he may come home safe, and live happily with her whom he loves so tenderly—so tenderly, O God." And then she would burst into tears, and drop asleep at last, sobbing.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. KIRKPATRICK, Q.C.

Cynthia was always the same with Molly: kind, sweet-tempered, ready to help, professing a great deal of love for her, and probably feeling as much as she did for any one in the world. But Molly had reached to this superficial depth of affection and intimacy in the first few weeks of Cynthia's residence in her father's house; and if she had been of a nature prone to analyse the character of one whom she loved dearly, she might have perceived that, with all Cynthia's apparent frankness, there were certain limits beyond which her confidence did not go; where her reserve began, and her real self was shrouded in mystery. For instance, her relations with Mr. Preston were often very puzzling to Molly. She was sure that there had been a much greater intimacy between them formerly at Ashcombe, and that the remembrance of this was often very galling and irritating to Cynthia, who was evidently desirous of forgetting it as he was anxious to make her remember it. But why this intimacy had ceased, why Cynthia disliked him so extremly now, and many other unexplained circumstances connected with these two facts, were Cynthia's secrets; and she effectually baffled all Molly's innocent attempts during the first glow of her friendship for Cynthia, to learn the girlish antecedents of her companion's life. Every now and then Molly came to a dead wall, beyond which she could not pass—at least with the delicate instruments which were all she chose to use. Perhaps Cynthia might have told all there was to tell to a more forcible curiosity, which knew how to improve every slip of the tongue and every fit of temper to its own gratification. But Molly's was the interest of affection, not the coarser desire of knowing everything for a little excitement; and as soon as she saw that Cynthia did not wish to

tell her anything about that period of her life, Molly left off referring to it. But if Cynthia had preserved a sweet tranquillity of manner and an unvarying kindness for Molly during the winter of which there is question, at present she was the only person to whom the beauty's ways were unchanged. Mr. Gibson's influence had been good for her as long as she saw that he liked her; she had tried to keep as high a place in his good opinion as she could, and had curbed many a little sarcasm against her mother, and many a twisting of the absolute truth when he was by. Now there was a constant uneasiness about her which made her more cowardly than before; and even her partisan, Molly, could not help being aware of the distinct equivocations she occasionally used when anything in Mr. Gibson's words or behaviour pressed her too hard. Her repartees to her mother were less frequent than they had been, but there was often the unusual phenomenon of pettishness in her behaviour to her. These changes in humour and disposition, here described all at once, were in themselves a series of delicate alterations of relative conduct spread over many months—many winter months of long evenings and bad weather, which bring out discords of character, as a dash of cold water brings out the fading colours of an old fresco.

During much of this time Mr. Preston had been at Ashcombe; for Lord Cumnor had not been able to find an agent whom he liked to replace Mr. Preston; and while the inferior situation remained vacant Mr. Preston had undertaken to do the duties of both. Mrs. Goodenough had had a serious illness; and the little society at Hollingford did not care to meet while one of their habitual set was scarcely out of danger. So there had been very little visiting; and though Miss Browning said that the absence of the temptations of society was very agreeable to cultivated minds, after the dissipations of the previous autumn, when there were parties every week to welcome Mr. Preston, yet Miss Phœbe let out in confidence that she and her sister had fallen into the habit of going to bed at nine o'clock, for they found cribbage night after night, from five o'clock till ten, rather too much of a good thing. To tell the truth, that winter, if peaceful, was monotonous in Hollingford; and the whole circle of gentility there was delighted to be stirred up in March by the intelligence that Mr. Kirkpatrick, the newly-made Q.C., was coming on a visit of a couple of days to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Goodenough's room was the very centre of gossip;

gossip had been her daily bread through her life, gossip was meat and wine to her now.

"Dear-ah-me!" said the old lady, rousing herself so as to sit upright in her easy-chair, and propping herself with her hands on the arms; "who would ha' thought she'd such grand relations! Why, Mr. Ashton told me once that a Queen's counsel was as like to be a judge as a kitten is like to be a cat. And to think of her being as good as sister to a judge! I saw one onest; and I know I thought as I shouldn't wish for a better winter-cloak than his old robes would make me, if I could only find out where I could get 'em second-hand. And I know she'd her silk gowns turned and dyed and cleaned, and, for aught I know, turned again, while she lived at Ashcombe. Keeping a school, too, and so near akin to this Queen's counsel all the time! Well, to be sure, it was not much of a school—only ten young ladies at the best o' times; so perhaps he never heard of it."

"I've been wondering what they'll give him to dinner," said Miss Browning. "It is an unlucky time for visitors; no game to be had, and lamb so late this year, and chicken hardly to be had for love or money."

"He'll have to put up with calf's head, that he will," said Mrs. Goodenough, solemnly. "If I'd ha' got my usual health I'd copy out a receipt of my grandmother's for a rolled calf's head, and send it to Mrs. Gibson—the doctor has been very kind to me all through this illness—I wish my daughter in Combermere would send me some autumn chickens—I'd pass 'em on to the doctor, that I would; but she's been a killing of 'em all, and a sending of them to me, and the last she sent she wrote me word was the last."

"I wonder if they'll give a party for him!" suggested Miss Phœbe. "I should like to see a Queen's counsel for once in my life. I have seen javelin-men, but that's the greatest thing in the legal line I ever came across."

"They'll ask Mr. Ashton, of course," said Miss Browning. "The three black graces, Law, Physic, and Divinity, as the song calls them. Whenever there's a second course, there's always the clergyman of the parish invited in any family of gentility."

"I wonder if he's married!" said Mrs. Goodenough. Miss Phœbe had been feeling the same wonder, but had not thought it maidenly to express it, even to her sister, who was the source of knowledge, having met Mrs. Gibson in the street on her way to Mrs. Goodenough's.

"Yes, he's married, and must have several children, for Mrs. Gibson said that Cynthia Kirkpatrick had paid them a visit in London, to have lessons with her cousins. And she said that his wife was a most accomplished woman, and of good family, though she brought him no fortune."

"It's a very creditable connection, I'm sure; it's only a wonder to me as how we've heard so little talk of it before," said Mrs. Goodenough. "At the first look of the thing, I shouldn't ha' thought Mrs. Gibson was one to hide away her fine relations under a bushel; indeed, for that matter, we're all of us fond o' turning the best breadth o' the gown to the front. I remember, speaking o' breadths, how I've undone my skirts many a time and oft to put a stain or a grease-spot next to poor Mr. Goodenough. He'd a soft kind of heart when first we was married, and he said, says he, 'Patty, link thy right arm into my left one, then thou'lt be nearer to my heart;' and so we kept up the habit, when, poor man, he'd a deal more to think on than romancing on which side his heart lay; so as I said I always put my damaged breadths on the right hand, and when we walked arm in arm, as we always did, no one was never the wiser."

"I should not be surprised if he invited Cynthia to pay him another visit in London," said Miss Browning. "If he did it when he was poor, he's twenty times more likely to do it now he's a Queen's counsel."

"Ay, work it by the rule o' three, and she stands a good chance. I only hope it won't turn her head; going up visiting in London at her age. Why, I was fifty before ever I went!"

"But she has been in France; she's quite a travelled young lady," said Miss Phœbe.

Mrs. Goodenough shook her head for a whole minute before she gave vent to her opinion.

"It's a risk," said she, "a great risk. I don't like saying so to the doctor, but I shouldn't like having my daughter, if I was him, so cheek-by-jowl with a girl as was brought up in the country where Robespierre and Bonyparte was born."

"But Buonaparte was a Corsican," said Miss Browning, who was much farther advanced both in knowledge and in liberality of opinions than Mrs. Goodenough. "And there's a great opportunity for cultivation of the mind afforded by intercourse with foreign countries. I always admire Cynthia's grace of manner, never too

shy to speak, yet never putting herself forwards; she's quite a help to a party; and if she has a few airs and graces, why they're natural at her age! Now as for dear Molly, there's a kind of awkwardness about her—she broke one of our best china cups last time she was at a party at our house, and spilt the coffee on the new carpet; and then she got so confused that she hardly did anything but sit in a corner and hold her tongue all the rest of the evening."

"She was so sorry for what she'd done, sister," said Miss Phœbe, in a gentle tone of reproach; she was always faithful to Molly.

"Well, and did I say she wasn't? but was there any need for her to be stupid all the evening after?"

"But you were rather sharp,—rather displeased——"

"And I think it my duty to be sharp, ay, and cross too, when I see young folks careless. And when I see my duty clear I do it; I'm not one to shrink from it, and they ought to be grateful to me. It's not every one that will take the trouble of reproving them, as Mrs. Goodenough knows. I'm very fond of Molly Gibson, very, for her own sake and for her mother's too; I'm not sure if I don't think she's worth half-a-dozen Cynthias, but for all that she shouldn't break my best china teacup, and then sit doing nothing for her livelihood all the rest of the evening."

By this time Mrs. Goodenough gave evident signs of being tired; Molly's misdemeanors and Miss Browning's broken tea cup were not as exciting subjects of conversation as Mrs. Gibson's newly-discovered good luck in having a successful London lawyer for a relation.

Mr. Kirkpatrick had been, like many other men, struggling on in his profession, and encumbered with a large family of his own; he was ready to do a good turn for his connections, if it occasioned him no loss of time, and if (which was, perhaps, a primary condition) he remembered their existence. Cynthia's visit to Doughty Street nine or ten years ago had not made much impression upon him after he had once suggested its feasibility to his good-natured wife. He was even rather startled every now and then by the appearance of a pretty little girl amongst his own children, as they trooped in to dessert, and had to remind himself who she was. But as it was his custom to leave the table almost immediately and to retreat into a small back-room called his study, to immerse himself in papers for the rest of the evening, the child had not made much

impression upon him; and probably the next time he remembered her existence was when Mrs. Kirkpatrick wrote to him to beg him to receive Cynthia for a night on her way to school at Boulogne. The same request was repeated on her return; but it so happened that he had not seen her either time; and only dimly remembered some remarks which his wife had made on one of these occasions, that it seemed to her rather hazardous to send so young a girl so long a journey without making more provision for her safety than Mrs. Kirkpatrick had done. He knew that his wife would fill up all deficiencies in this respect as if Cynthia had been her own daughter; and thought no more about her until he received an invitation to attend Mrs. Kirkpatrick's wedding with Mr. Gibson, the highly-esteemed surgeon of Hollingford, &c. &c.—an attention which irritated instead of pleasing him. "Does the woman think I have nothing to do but run about the country in search of brides and bridegrooms, when this great case of Houghton *v.* Houghton is coming on, and I haven't a moment to spare?" he asked of his wife.

"Perhaps she never heard of it," suggested Mrs. Kirkpatrick.

"Nonsense! the case has been in the papers for days."

"But she mayn't know you are engaged in it."

"She mayn't," said he, meditatively—such ignorance was possible.

But now the great case of Houghton *v.* Houghton was a thing of the past; the hard struggle was over, the comparative table-land of Q. C.-dom gained, and Mr. Kirkpatrick had leisure for family feeling and recollection. One day in the Easter vacation he found himself near Hollingford; he had a Sunday to spare, and he wrote to offer himself as a visitor to the Gibsons from Friday to Monday, expressing strongly (what he really felt, in a less degree,) his wish to make Mr. Gibson's acquaintance. Mr. Gibson, though often overwhelmed with professional business, was always hospitable; and moreover, it was always a pleasure to him to get out of the somewhat confined mental atmosphere which he had breathed over and over again, and have a whiff of fresh air: a glimpse of what was passing in the great world beyond his daily limits of thought and action. So he was ready to give a cordial welcome to his unknown relation. Mrs. Gibson was in a flutter of sentimental delight, which she fancied was family affection, but which might not have been quite so effervescent if Mr. Kirkpatrick had remained

in his former position of struggling lawyer, with seven children, living in Doughty Street.

When the two gentlemen met they were attracted towards each other by a similarity of character, with just enough difference in their opinions to make the experience of each, on which such opinions were based, valuable to the other. To Mrs. Gibson, although the bond between them counted for very little in their intercourse, Mr. Kirkpatrick paid very polite attention; and was, in fact, very glad that she had done so well for herself as to marry a sensible and agreeable man, who was able to keep her in comfort, and to behave to her daughter in so liberal a manner. Molly struck him as a delicate-looking girl, who might be very pretty if she had a greater look of health and animation: indeed, looking at her critically, there were beautiful points about her face—long soft grey eyes, black curling eyelashes, rarely-showing dimples, perfect teeth; but there was a languor over all, a slow depression of manner, which contrasted unfavourably with the brightly-coloured Cynthia, sparkling, quick, graceful, and witty. As Mr. Kirkpatrick expressed it afterwards to his wife, he was quite in love with that girl; and Cynthia, as ready to captivate strangers as any little girl of three or four, rose to the occasion, forgot all her cares and despondencies, remembered no longer her regret at having lost something of Mr. Gibson's good opinion, and listened eagerly and made soft replies, intermixed with naïve sallies of droll humour, till Mr. Kirkpatrick was quite captivated. He left Hollingford, almost surprised to have performed a duty, and found it a pleasure. For Mrs. Gibson and Molly he had a general friendly feeling; but he did not care if he never saw them again. But for Mr. Gibson he had a warm respect, a strong personal liking, which he should be glad to have ripen into a friendship, if there was time for it in this bustling world. And he fully resolved to see more of Cynthia; his wife must know her; they must have her up to stay with them in London, and show her something of the world. But, on returning home, Mr. Kirkpatrick found so much work awaiting him that he had to lock up embryo friendships and kindly plans in some safe closet of his mind, and gave himself up, body and soul, to the immediate work of his profession. But, in May, he found time to take his wife to the Academy Exhibition, and some portrait there striking him as being like Cynthia, he told his wife more about her and his visit to Hollingford than he had ever had leisure to do before; and

the result was that on the next day a letter was sent off to Mrs. Gibson, inviting Cynthia to pay a visit to her cousins in London, and reminding her of many little circumstances that had occurred when she was with them as a child, so as to carry on the clue of friendship from that time to the present.

On its receipt this letter was greeted in various ways by the four people who sate round the breakfast-table. Mrs. Gibson read it to herself first. Then without telling what its contents were, so that her auditors were quite in the dark as to what her remarks applied, she said,—

"I think they might have remembered that I am a generation nearer to them than she is, but nobody thinks of family affection now-a-days; and I liked him so much, and bought a new cookery-book, all to make it pleasant and agreeable and what he was used to." She said all this in a plaintive, aggrieved tone of voice; but as no one knew to what she was referring, it was difficult to offer her consolation. Her husband was the first to speak.

"If you want us to sympathize with you, tell us what is the nature of your woe."

"Why, I daresay it's what he means as a very kind attention, only I think I ought to have been asked before Cynthia," said she, reading the letter over again.

"Who's *he?* and what's meant for a 'kind attention?'"

"Mr. Kirkpatrick, to be sure. This letter is from him; and he wants Cynthia to go and pay them a visit, and never says anything about you or me, my dear. And I'm sure we did our best to make it pleasant; and he should have asked us first, I think."

"As I could not possibly have gone, it makes very little difference to me."

"But I could have gone; and, at any rate, he should have paid us the compliment: it's only a proper mark of respect, you know. So ungrateful, too, when I gave up my dressing-room on purpose for him!"

"And I dressed for dinner every day he was here, if we are each to recapitulate all our sacrifices on his behalf. But for all that I didn't expect to be invited to his house. I shall be only too glad if he will come again to mine."

"I've a great mind not to let Cynthia go," said Mrs. Gibson reflectively.

"I can't go, mamma," said Cynthia, colouring. "My gowns are all so shabby, and my old bonnet must do for the summer."

"Well, but you can buy a new one; and I'm sure it is high time you should get yourself another silk gown. You must have been saving up a great deal, for I don't know when you've had any new clothes."

Cynthia began to say something, but stopped short. She went on buttering her toast, but she held it in her hand without eating it; without looking up either, as, after a minute or two of silence, she spoke again:—

"I cannot go. I should like it very much; but I really cannot go. Please, mamma, write at once, and refuse it."

"Nonsense, child! When a man in Mr. Kirkpatrick's position comes forward to offer a favour, it does not do to decline it without giving a sufficient reason. So kind of him as it is, too!"

"Suppose you offer to go instead of me?" proposed Cynthia.

"No, no! that won't do," said Mr. Gibson, decidedly. "You can't transfer invitations in that way. But really this excuse about your clothes does appear to be very trivial, Cynthia, if you have no other reason to give."

"It is a real, true reason to me," said Cynthia, looking up at him as she spoke. "You must let me judge for myself. It would not do to go there in a state of shabbiness, for even in Doughty Street, I remember, my aunt was very particular about dress; and now that Margaret and Helen are grown up, and they visit so much,—pray don't say anything more about it, for I know it would not do."

"What have you done with all your money, I wonder?" said Mrs. Gibson. "You've twenty pounds a year, thanks to Mr. Gibson and me; and I'm sure you haven't spent more than ten."

"I hadn't many things when I came back from France," said Cynthia, in a low voice, and evidently troubled by all this questioning. "Pray let it be decided at once; I can't go, and there's an end of it." She got up, and left the room rather suddenly.

"I don't understand it at all," said Mrs. Gibson. "Do you, Molly?"

"No. I know she doesn't like spending money on her dress, and is very careful." Molly said this much, and then was afraid she had made mischief.

"But then she must have got the money somewhere. It always has struck me that if you have not extravagant habits, and do not live up to your income, you must have a certain sum to lay by at the end of the year. Have I not often said so, Mr. Gibson?"

"Probably."

"Well, then, apply the same reasoning to Cynthia's case; and then, I ask, what has become of the money?"

"I cannot tell," said Molly, seeing that she was appealed to. "She may have given it away to some one who wants it."

Mr. Gibson put down his newspaper.

"It's very clear that she has neither got the dress nor the money necessary for this London visit, and that she doesn't want any more inquiries to be made on the subject. She likes mysteries, in fact, and I detest them. Still, I think it's a desirable thing for her to keep up the acquaintance, or friendship, or whatever it is to be called, with her father's family; and I shall gladly give her ten pounds; and if that's not enough, why, either you must help her out, or she must do without some superfluous article of dress or another."

"I'm sure there never was such a kind, dear, generous man as you are, Mr. Gibson," said his wife. "To think of your being a stepfather! and so good to my poor fatherless girl! But, Molly my dear, I think you'll acknowledge that you too are very fortunate in your stepmother. Are not you, love? And what happy tête-à-têtes we shall have together when Cynthia goes to London! I'm not sure if I don't get on better with you even than with her, though she is my own child; for, as dear papa says so truly, there is a love of mystery about her; and if I hate anything, it is the slightest concealment or reserve. Ten pounds! Why, it will quite set her up, buy her a couple of gowns and a new bonnet, and I don't know what all! Dear Mr. Gibson, how generous you are!"

Something very like "Pshaw!" was growled out from behind the newspaper.

"May I go and tell her?" said Molly, rising up.

"Yes, do, love. Tell her it would be so ungrateful to refuse; and tell her that your father wishes her to go; and tell her, too, that it would be quite wrong not to avail herself of an opening which may by-and-by be extended to the rest of the family. I am sure if they ask me—which certainly they ought to do—I won't say before they asked Cynthia, because I never think of myself, and am really the most forgiving person in the world, in forgiving slights;—but when they do ask me, which they are sure to do, I shall never be content till, by putting in a little hint here and a little hint there, I've induced them to send you an invitation. A month or two in London would do you so much good, Molly."

Molly had left the room before this speech was ended, and Mr. Gibson was occupied with his newspaper; but Mrs. Gibson finished it to herself very much to her own satisfaction; for, after all, it was better to have some one of the family going on the visit, though she might not be the right person, than to refuse it altogether, and never to have the opportunity of saying anything about it. As Mr. Gibson was so kind to Cynthia, she too would be kind to Molly, and dress her becomingly, and invite young men to the house; do all the things, in fact, which Molly and her father did not want to have done, and throw the old stumbling-blocks in the way of their unrestrained intercourse, which was the one thing they desired to have, free and open, and without the constant dread of her jealousy.

CHAPTER X.

SECRET THOUGHTS OOZE OUT.

Molly found Cynthia in the drawing-room, standing in the bow-window, looking out on the garden. She started as Molly came up to her.

"Oh, Molly," said she, putting her arms out towards her, "I am always so glad to have you with me!"

It was outbursts of affection such as these that always called Molly back, if she had been ever so unconsciously wavering in her allegiance to Cynthia. She had been wishing downstairs that Cynthia would be less reserved, and not have so many secrets; but now it seemed almost like treason to have wanted her to be anything but what she was. Never had any one more than Cynthia the power spoken of by Goldsmith when he wrote—

> He threw off his friends like a huntsman his pack,
> For he knew when he liked he could whistle them back.

"Do you know, I think you'll be glad to hear what I've got to tell you," said Molly. "I think you would really like to go to London; shouldn't you?"

"Yes, but it's of no use liking," said Cynthia. "Don't you begin about it, Molly, for the thing is settled; and I can't tell you why, but I can't go."

"It is only the money, dear. And papa has been so kind about it. He wants you to go; he thinks you ought to keep up relationships; and he is going to give you ten pounds."

"How kind he is!" said Cynthia. "But I ought not to take it. I wish I had known you years ago; I should have been different to what I am."

"Never mind that! We like you as you are; we don't want

you different. You'll really hurt papa if you don't take it. Why do you hesitate? Do you think Roger won't like it?"

"Roger! no, I wasn't thinking about him! Why should he care? I shall be there and back again before he even hears about it."

"Then you will go?" said Molly.

Cynthia thought for a minute or two. "Yes, I will," said she, at length. "I daresay it's not wise; but it will be pleasant, and I'll go. Where is Mr. Gibson? I want to thank him. Oh, how kind he is! Molly, you're a lucky girl!"

"I?" said Molly, quite startled at being told this; for she had been feeling as if so many things were going wrong, almost as if they would never go right again.

"There he is!" said Cynthia. "I hear him in the hall!" And down she flew, and laying her hands on Mr. Gibson's arm, she thanked him with such warm impulsiveness, and in so pretty and caressing a manner, that something of his old feeling of personal liking for her returned, and he forgot for a time the causes of disapproval he had against her.

"There, there!" said he, "that's enough, my dear! It's quite right you should keep up with your relations; there's nothing more to be said about it."

"I do think your father is the most charming man I know," said Cynthia, on her return to Molly; "and it's that which always makes me so afraid of losing his good opinion, and fret so when I think he is displeased with me. And now let us think all about this London visit. It will be delightful, won't it? I can make ten pounds go ever so far; and in some ways it will be such a comfort to get out of Hollingford."

"Will it?" said Molly, rather wistfully.

"Oh, yes! You know I don't mean that it will be a comfort to leave you; that will be anything but a comfort. But, after all, a country town is a country town, and London is London. You need not smile at my truisms; I've always had a sympathy with M. de la Palisse,—

M. de la Palisse est mort
En perdant sa vie;
Un quart d'heure avant sa mort
Il était en vie,"

sang she, in so gay a manner that she puzzled Molly, as she often did, by her change of mood from the gloomy decision with which she had refused to accept the invitation only half an hour ago. She

suddenly took Molly round the waist, and began waltzing about the room with her, to the imminent danger of the various little tables, loaded with "objets d'art" (as Mrs. Gibson delighted to call them) with which the drawing-room was crowded. She avoided them, however, with her usual skill; but they both stood still at last, surprised at Mrs. Gibson's surprise, as she stood at the door, looking at the whirl going on before her.

"Upon my word, I only hope you are not going crazy, both of you? What's all this about, pray?"

"Only because I'm so glad I'm going to London, mamma," said Cynthia, demurely.

"I'm not sure if it's quite the thing for an engaged young lady to be so much beside herself at the prospect of gaiety. In my time, our great pleasure in our lovers' absence was in thinking about them."

"I should have thought that would have given you pain, because you would have had to remember that they were away, which ought to have made you unhappy. Now, to tell you the truth, just at the moment I had forgotten all about Roger. I hope it wasn't very wrong. Osborne looks as if he did all my share as well as his own of the fretting after Roger. How ill he looked yesterday!"

"Yes," said Molly; "I didn't know if any one besides me had noticed it. I was quite shocked."

"Ah," said Mrs. Gibson, "I'm afraid that young man won't live long—very much afraid," and she shook her head ominously.

"Oh, what will happen if he dies!" exclaimed Molly, suddenly sitting down, and thinking of that strange, mysterious wife who never made her appearance, whose very existence was never spoken about—and Roger away too!

"Well, it would be very sad, of course, and we should all feel it very much, I've no doubt; for I've always been very fond of Osborne; in fact, before Roger became, as it were, my own flesh and blood, I liked Osborne better: but we must not forget the living, dear Molly" (for Molly's eyes were filling with tears at the dismal thoughts presented to her). "Our dear good Roger would, I am sure, do all in his power to fill Osborne's place in any way; and his marriage need not be so long delayed."

"Don't speak of that in the same breath as Osborne's life, mamma," said Cynthia, hastily.

"Why, my dear, it is a very natural thought. For poor Roger's sake, you know, one wishes it not to be so very, very long an engagement; and I was only answering Molly's question, after all. One can't help following out one's thoughts. People must die, you know—young, as well as old."

"If I ever suspected Roger of following out his thoughts in a similar way," said Cynthia, "I'd never speak to him again."

"As if he would!" said Molly, warm in her turn. "You know he never would; and you shouldn't suppose it of him, Cynthia—no, not even for a moment!"

"I can't see the great harm of it all, for my part," said Mrs. Gibson, plaintively. "A young man strikes us all as looking very ill—and I'm sure I'm sorry for it; but illness very often leads to death. Surely you agree with me there, and what's the harm of saying so? Then Molly asks what will happen if he dies; and I try to answer her question. I don't like talking or thinking of death any more than any one else; but I should think myself wanting in strength of mind if I could not look forward to the consequences of death. I really think we're commanded to do so, somewhere in the Bible or the Prayer-book."

"Do you look forward to the consequences of my death, mamma?" asked Cynthia.

"You really are the most unfeeling girl I ever met with," said Mrs. Gibson, really hurt. "I wish I could give you a little of my own sensitiveness, for I have too much for my happiness. Don't let us speak of Osborne's looks again; ten to one it was only some temporary over-fatigue, or some anxiety about Roger, or perhaps a little fit of indigestion. I was very foolish to attribute it to anything more serious, and dear papa might be displeased if he knew I had done so. Medical men don't like other people to be making conjectures about health; they consider it as trenching on their own particular province, and very proper, I'm sure. Now let us consider about your dress, Cynthia; I could not understand how you had spent your money, and made so little show with it."

"Mamma! it may sound very cross, but I must tell Molly and you, and everybody, once for all, that as I don't want and I didn't ask for more than my allowance, I'm not going to answer any questions about what I do with it." She did not say this with any want of respect; but she said it with quiet determination, which subdued her mother for the time; though often afterwards, when

Mrs. Gibson and Molly were alone, the former would start the wonder as to what Cynthia could possibly have done with her money, and hint each poor conjecture through woods and vallies of doubt, till she was wearied out; and the exciting sport was given up for the day. At present, however, she confined herself to the practical matter in hand; and the genius for millinery and dress, inherent in both mother and daughter, soon settled a great many knotty points of contrivance and taste, and then they all three set to work to "gar auld claes look amaist as weel's the new."

Cynthia's relations with the squire had been very stationary ever since the visit she had paid to the Hall the previous autumn. He had received them all at that time with hospitable politeness, and he had been more charmed with Cynthia than he liked to acknowledge to himself when he thought the visit all over afterwards.

"She's a pretty lass, sure enough," thought he, "and has pretty ways about her too, and likes to learn from older people; which is a good sign; but, somehow, I don't like madam her mother; but still she is her mother, and the girl is her daughter; yet she spoke to her once or twice as I shouldn't ha' liked our little Fanny to have spoken, if it had pleased God for her to ha' lived. No, it's not the right way, and it may be a bit old-fashioned, but I like the right way. And then again she took possession o' me, as I may say, and little Molly had to run after us in the garden walks that are too narrow for three, just like a little four-legged doggie; and the other was so full of listening to me, she never turned round for to speak a word to Molly. I don't mean to say they're not fond of each other, and that's in Roger's sweetheart's favour; and it's very ungrateful in me to go and find fault with a lass who was so civil to me, and had such a pretty way with her of hanging on every word that fell from my lips. Well! a deal may come and go in two years! and the lad says nothing to me about it. I'll be as deep as him, and take no more notice of the affair till he comes home and tells me himself."

So although the squire was always delighted to receive the little notes which Cynthia sent to him every time she heard from Roger, and although this attention on her part was melting the heart he tried to harden, he controlled himself into writing her the briefest acknowledgments. His words were strong in meaning, but formal in expression; she herself did not think much about them, being satisfied to do the kind actions that called them forth. But her

mother criticised them and pondered them. She thought she had hit on the truth when she had decided in her own mind that it was a very old-fashioned style, and that he and his house and his furniture all wanted some of the brightening up and polishing which they were sure to receive, when——she never quite liked to finish the sentence definitely, although she kept repeating to herself that "there was no harm in it."

To return to the squire. Occupied as he now was, he recovered his former health, and something of his former cheerfulness. If Osborne had met him half-way, it is probable that the old bond between father and son might have been renewed; but Osborne either was really an invalid, or had sunk into invalid habits, and made no effort to rally. If his father urged him to go out—nay, once or twice he gulped down his pride, and asked Osborne to accompany him—Osborne would go to the window and find out some flaw or speck in the wind or weather, and make that an excuse for stopping in the house over his books. He would saunter out on the sunny side of the house in a manner that the squire considered as both indolent and unmanly. Yet if there was a prospect of his leaving home, which he did pretty often about this time, he was seized with a hectic energy: the clouds in the sky, the easterly wind, the dampness of the air, were nothing to him then; and as the squire did not know the real secret cause of this anxiety to be gone, he took it into his head that it arose from Osborne's dislike to Hamley and to the monotony of his father's society.

"It was a mistake," thought the squire. "I see it now. I was never great at making friends myself: I always thought those Oxford and Cambridge men turned up their noses at me for a country booby, and I'd get the start and have none o' them. But when the boys went to Rugby and Cambridge, I should ha' let them have had their own friends about 'em, even though they might ha' looked down on me; it was the worst they could ha' done to me, and now what few friends I had have fallen off from me, by death or somehow, and it is but dreary work for a young man, I grant it. But he might try not to show it so plain to me as he does. I'm getting case-hardened, but it does cut me to the quick sometimes—it does. And he so fond of his dad as he was once! If I can but get the land drained I'll make him an allowance, and let him go to London, or where he likes. Maybe he'll do better this time, or maybe he'll go to the dogs altogether; but perhaps it will make him

think a bit kindly of the old father at home—I should like him to do that, I should!"

It is possible that Osborne might have been induced to tell his father of his marriage during their long solitary intercourse, if the squire, in an unlucky moment, had not given him his confidence about Roger's engagement with Cynthia. It was on one wet Sunday afternoon, when the father and son were sitting together in the large empty drawing-room: Osborne had not been to church in the morning; the squire had, and he was now trying hard to read one of Blair's sermons. They had dined early; they always did on Sundays; and either that, or the sermon, or the hopeless wetness of the day, made the afternoon seem interminably long to the squire. He had certain unwritten rules for the regulation of his conduct on Sundays. Cold meat, sermon-reading, no smoking till after evening prayers, as little thought as possible as to the state of the land and the condition of the crops, and as much respectable sitting in-doors in his best clothes as was consistent with going to church twice a day, and saying the responses louder than the clerk. To-day it had rained so unceasingly that he had remitted the afternoon church; but oh, even with the luxury of a nap, how long it seemed before he saw the Hall servants trudging homewards, along the field-path, a covey of umbrellas! He had been standing at the window for the last half-hour, his hands in his pockets, and his mouth often contracting itself into the traditional sin of a whistle, but as often checked into sudden gravity—ending, nine times out of ten, in a yawn. He looked askance at Osborne, who was sitting near the fire absorbed in a book. The poor squire was something like the little boy in the child's story, who asks all sorts of birds and beasts to come and play with him; and, in every case, receives the sober answer, that they are too busy to have leisure for trivial amusements. The father wanted the son to put down his book, and talk to him: it was so wet, so dull, and a little conversation would so wile away the time! But Osborne, with his back to the window where his father was standing, saw nothing of all this, and went on reading. He had assented to his father's remark that it was a very wet afternoon, but had not carried on the subject into all the varieties of truisms of which it was susceptible. Something more rousing must be started, and this the squire felt. The recollection of the affair between Roger and Cynthia came into his head, and, without giving it a moment's consideration, he began,—

"Osborne! Do you know anything about this—this attachment of Roger's?"

Quite successful. Osborne laid down his book in a moment, and turned round to his father.

"Roger! an attachment! No! I never heard of it—I can hardly believe it—that is to say, I suppose it is to——"

And then he stopped; for he thought he had no right to betray his own conjecture that the object was Cynthia Kirkpatrick.

"Yes. He is though. Can you guess who to? Nobody that I particularly like—not a connection to my mind—yet she's a very pretty girl; and I suppose I was to blame in the first instance."

"Is it ——?"

"It's no use beating about the bush. I've gone so far, I may as well tell you all. It's Miss Kirkpatrick, Gibson's stepdaughter. But it's not an engagement, mind you——"

"I'm very glad—I hope she likes Roger back again——"

"Like—it's only too good a connection for her not to like it: if Roger is of the same mind when he comes home, I'll be bound she'll be only too happy!"

"I wonder Roger never told me," said Osborne, a little hurt, now he began to consider himself.

"He never told me either," said the squire. "It was Gibson, who came here, and made a clean breast of it, like a man of honour. I'd been saying to him, I could not have either of you two lads taking up with his lasses. I'll own it was you I was afraid of—it's bad enough with Roger, and maybe will come to nothing after all; but if it had been you, I'd ha' broken with Gibson and every mother's son of 'em, sooner than have let it go on; and so I told Gibson."

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, but, once for all, I claim the right of choosing my wife for myself, subject to no man's interference," said Osborne, hotly.

"Then you'll keep your wife with no man's interference, that's all; for ne'er a penny will you get from me, my lad, unless you marry to please me a little, as well as yourself a great deal. That's all I ask of you. I'm not particular as to beauty, or as to cleverness, and piano-playing, and that sort of thing; if Roger marries this girl, we shall have enough of that in the family. I should not much mind her being a bit older than you, but she must be well-born, and the more money she brings the better for the old place."

"I say again, father, I choose my wife for myself, and I don't admit any man's right of dictation."

"Well, well!" said the squire, getting a little angry in his turn. "If I'm not to be father in this matter, thou sha'n't be son. Go against me in what I've set my heart on, and you'll find there's the devil to pay, that's all. But don't let us get angry, it's Sunday afternoon for one thing, and it's a sin; and besides that, I've not finished my story."

For Osborne had taken up his book again, and under pretence of reading, was fuming to himself. He hardly put it away even at his father's request.

"As I was saying, Gibson said, when first we spoke about it, that there was nothing on foot between any of you four, and that if there was, he would let me know; so by-and-by he comes and tells me of this."

"Of what—I don't understand how far it has gone?"

There was a tone in Osborne's voice the squire did not quite like; and he began answering rather angrily.

"Of this to be sure—of what I'm telling you—of Roger going and making love to this girl, that day he left, after he had gone away from here, and was waiting for the 'Umpire' in Hollingford. One would think you quite stupid at times, Osborne."

"I can only say that these details are quite new to me; you never mentioned them before, I assure you."

"Well; never mind whether I did or not. I'm sure I said Roger was attached to Miss Kirkpatrick, and be hanged to her; and you might have understood all the rest as a matter of course."

"Possibly," said Osborne, politely. "May I ask if Miss Kirkpatrick, who appeared to me to be a very nice girl, responds to Roger's affection?"

"Fast enough, I'll be bound," said the squire, sulkily. "A Hamley of Hamley is not to be had every day. Now, I'll tell you what, Osborne, you're the only marriageable one left in the market, and I want to hoist the old family up again. Don't go against me in this; it really will break my heart if you do."

"Father, don't talk so," said Osborne. "I will do anything I can to oblige you, except——"

"Except the only thing I've set my heart on your doing?"

"Well, well, let it alone for the present. There's no question of my marrying just at this moment. I'm out of health, and I'm not

up to going into society, and meeting young ladies and all that sort of thing, even if I had an opening into fitting society."

"You should have an opening fast enough. There'll be more money coming in, in a year or two, please God. And as for your health, why, what's to make you well, if you cower over the fire all day, and shudder away from a good honest tankard as if it were poison?"

"So it is to me," said Osborne, languidly, playing with his book as if he wanted to end the conversation and take it up again. The squire saw the movements, and understood them.

"Well," said he, "I'll go and have a talk with Will about poor old Black Bess. It's Sunday work enough, asking after a dumb animal's aches and pains."

But after his father had left the room Osborne did not take up his book again. He laid it down on the table by him, leant back in his chair, and covered his eyes with his hand. He was in a state of health which made him despondent about many things, though, least of all, about what was most in danger. The long concealment of his marriage from his father made the disclosure of it far, far more difficult than it would have been at first. Unsupported by Roger, how could he explain it all to one so passionate as the squire? how tell of the temptation, the stolen marriage, the consequent happiness, and alas! the consequent suffering?—for Osborne had suffered, and did suffer, greatly in the untoward circumstances in which he had placed himself. He saw no way out of it all, excepting by the one strong stroke of which he felt himself incapable. So with a heavy heart he addressed himself to his book again. Everything seemed to come in his way, and he was not strong enough in character to overcome obstacles. The only overt step he took in consequence of what he had heard from his father, was to ride over to Hollingford the first fine day after he had received the news, and go to see Cynthia and the Gibsons. He had not been there for a long time; bad weather and languor combined had prevented him. He found them full of preparations and discussions about Cynthia's visit to London; and she herself not at all in the sentimental mood proper to respond to his delicate intimations of how glad he was in his brother's joy. Indeed, it was so long after the time, that Cynthia scarcely perceived that to him the intelligence was recent, and that the first bloom of his emotions had not yet passed away. With her head a little on one side, she was contemplating the effect of a knot

of ribbons, when he began, in a low whisper, and leaning forward towards her as he spoke,—"Cynthia—I may call you Cynthia now, mayn't I?—I'm so glad of this news; I've only just heard of it, but I'm so glad!"

"What news do you mean?" She had her suspicions; but she was annoyed to think that from one person her secret was passing to another and another, till, in fact, it was becoming no secret at all. Still, Cynthia could always conceal her annoyance when she chose. "Why are you to begin calling me Cynthia now?" she went on, smiling. "The terrible word has slipped out from between your lips before, do you know?"

This light way of taking his tender congratulation did not quite please Osborne, who was in a sentimental mood, and for a minute or so he remained silent. Then, having finished making her bow of ribbon, she turned to him, and continued in a quick low voice, anxious to take advantage of a tête-à-tête between her mother and Molly,—

"I think I can guess why you made that pretty little speech just now. But do you know you ought not to have been told? And, moreover, things are not quite arrived at the solemnity of—of —well—an engagement. He would not have it so. Now, I sha'n't say any more; and you must not. Pray remember you ought not to have known; it is my own secret, and I particularly wished it not to be spoken about; and I don't like it's being so talked about. Oh, the leaking of water through one small hole!"

And then she plunged into the talk of the other two, making the conversation general. Osborne was rather discomfited at the non-success of his congratulations; he had pictured to himself the unbosoming of a love-sick girl, full of rapture, and glad of a sympathizing confidant. He little knew Cynthia's nature. The more she suspected that she was called upon for a display of emotion, the less would she show; and her emotions were generally under the control of her will. He had made an effort to come and see her; and now he leant back in his chair, weary and a little dispirited.

"You poor dear young man," said Mrs. Gibson, coming up to him with her soft, soothing manner; "how tired you look! Do take some of that eau-de-Cologne and bathe your forehead. This spring weather overcomes me too. 'Primavera' I think the Italians call it. But it is very trying for delicate constitutions, as

much from its associations as from its variableness of temperature. It makes me sigh perpetually; but then I am so sensitive. Dear Lady Cumnor always used to say I was like a thermometer. You've heard how ill she has been?"

"No," said Osborne, not very much caring either.

"Oh, yes, she is better now; but the anxiety about her has tried me so: detained here by what are, of course, my duties, but far away from all intelligence, and not knowing what the next post might bring."

"Where was she then?" asked Osborne, becoming a little more sympathetic.

"At Spa. Such a distance off! Three days' post! Can't you conceive the trial? Living with her as I did for years; bound up in the family as I was."

"But Lady Harriet said, in her last letter, that they hoped she would be stronger than she had been for years," said Molly, innocently.

"Yes—Lady Harriet—of course—every one who knows Lady Harriet knows that she is of too sanguine a temperament for her statements to be perfectly relied on. Altogether—strangers are often deluded by Lady Harriet—she has an off-hand manner which takes them in; but she does not mean half she says."

"We will hope she does in this instance," said Cynthia, shortly. "They are in London now, and Lady Cumnor has not suffered from the journey."

"They say so," said Mrs. Gibson, shaking her head, and laying an emphasis on the word 'say.' "I am perhaps over-anxious, but I wish—I wish I could see and judge for myself. It would be the only way of calming my anxiety. I almost think I shall go up with you, Cynthia, for a day or two, just to see her with my own eyes. I don't quite like your travelling alone either. We will think about it, and you shall write to Mr. Kirkpatrick, and propose it, if we determine upon it. You can tell him of my anxiety; and it will be only sharing your bed for a couple of nights."

CHAPTER XI.

MOLLY GIBSON BREATHES FREELY.

That was the way in which Mrs. Gibson first broached her intention of accompanying Cynthia up to London for a few days' visit. She had a trick of producing the first sketch of any new plan before an outsider to the family circle; so that the first emotions of others, if they disapproved of her projects, had to be repressed, until the idea had become familiar to them. To Molly it seemed too charming a proposal ever to come to pass. She had never allowed herself to recognize the restraint she was under in her stepmother's presence; but all at once she found it out when her heart danced at the idea of three whole days—for that it would be at the least—of perfect freedom of intercourse with her father; of old times come back again; of meals without perpetual fidgetiness after details of ceremony and correctness of attendance.

"We'll have bread-and-cheese for dinner, and eat it on our knees; we'll make up for having had to eat sloppy puddings with a fork instead of a spoon all this time, by putting our knives in our mouths till we cut ourselves. Papa shall pour his tea into his saucer if he's in a hurry; and if I'm thirsty, I'll take the slop-basin. And oh, if I could but get, buy, borrow, or steal any kind of an old horse; my grey skirt isn't new, but it will do;—that would be too delightful. After all, I think I can be happy again; for months and months it has seemed as if I had got too old ever to feel pleasure, much less happiness again."

So thought Molly. Yet she blushed, as if with guilt, when Cynthia, reading her thoughts, said to her one day,—

"Molly, you're very glad to get rid of us, are not you?"

"Not of you, Cynthia; at least, I don't think I am. Only, if you but knew how I love papa, and how I used to see a great deal more of him than I ever do now——"

"Ah! I often think what interlopers we must seem, and are in fact——"

"I don't feel you as such. You, at any rate, have been a new delight to me—a sister; and I never knew how charming such a relationship could be."

"But mamma?" said Cynthia, half-suspiciously, half-sorrowfully.

"She is papa's wife," said Molly, quietly. "I don't mean to say I am not often very sorry to feel I am no longer first with him; but it was"—the violent colour flushed into her face till even her eyes burnt, and she suddenly found herself on the point of crying; the weeping ash-tree, the misery, the slow dropping comfort, and the comforter came all so vividly before her—"it was Roger!"—she went on looking up at Cynthia, as she overcame her slight hesitation at mentioning his name—"Roger, who told me how I ought to take papa's marriage, when I was first startled and grieved at the news. Oh, Cynthia, what a great thing it is to be loved by him!"

Cynthia blushed, and looked fluttered and pleased.

"Yes, I suppose it is. At the same time, Molly, I'm afraid he'll expect me to be always as good as he fancies me now, and I shall have to walk on tiptoe all the rest of my life."

"But you are good, Cynthia," put in Molly.

"No, I'm not. You're just as much mistaken as he is; and some day I shall go down in your opinions with a run, just like the hall clock the other day when the spring broke."

"I think he'll love you just as much," said Molly.

"Could you? Would you be my friend if—if it turned out even that I had done very wrong things? Would you remember how very difficult it has sometimes been to me to act rightly" (she took hold of Molly's hand as she spoke). "We won't speak of mamma, for your sake as much as mine or hers; but you must see she is not one to help a girl with much good advice, or good—— Oh, Molly, you don't know how I was neglected just at a time when I wanted friends most. Mamma does not know it; it is not in her to know what I might have been if I had only fallen into wise, good hands. But I know it; and what's more," continued she, suddenly ashamed of her unusual exhibition of feeling, "I try not to care, which I daresay is really the worst of all; but I could worry myself to death if I once took to serious thinking."

"I wish I could help you, or even understand you," said Molly, after a moment or two of sad perplexity.

"You can help me," said Cynthia, changing her manner abruptly. "I can trim bonnets, and make head-dresses; but somehow my hands can't fold up gowns and collars, like your deftlike fingers. Please will you help me to pack? That's a real, tangible piece of kindness, and not sentimental consolation for sentimental distresses, which are, perhaps, imaginary after all."

In general, it is the people that are left behind stationary, who give way to low spirits at any parting; the travellers, however bitterly they may feel the separation, find something in the change of scene to soften regret in the very first hour of separation. But as Molly walked home with her father from seeing Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia off to London by the "Umpire" coach, she almost danced along the street.

"Now, papa!" said she, "I'm going to have you all to myself for a whole week. You must be very obedient."

"Don't be tyrannical, then. You are walking me out of breath, and we are cutting Mrs. Goodenough, in our hurry."

"So they crossed over the street to speak to Mrs. Goodenough.

"We've just been seeing my wife and her daughter off to London. Mrs. Gibson has gone up for a week!"

"Deary, deary, to London, and only for a week! Why, I can remember its being a three days' journey! It will be very lonesome for you, Miss Molly, without your young companion!"

"Yes!" said Molly, suddenly feeling as if she ought to have taken this view of the case. "I shall miss Cynthia very much."

"And you, Mr. Gibson; why, it will be like being a widower once again! You must come and drink tea with me some evening. We must try and cheer you up a bit amongst us. Shall it be Tuesday?"

In spite of the sharp pinch which Molly gave to his arm, Mr. Gibson accepted the invitation, much to the gratification of the old lady.

"Papa, how could you go and waste one of our evenings! We have but six in all, and now but five; and I had so reckoned on our doing all sorts of things together."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, I don't know: everything that is unrefined and ungenteel," added she, slily looking up into her father's face.

His eyes twinkled, but the rest of his face was perfectly grave.

"I'm not going to be corrupted. With toil and labour I've reached a very fair height of refinement. I won't be pulled down again."

"Yes, you will, papa. We'll have bread-and-cheese for lunch this very day. And you shall wear your slippers in the drawing-room every evening you'll stay quietly at home; and oh, papa, don't you think I could ride Nora Creina? I've been looking out the old grey skirt, and I think I could make myself tidy."

"Where is the side-saddle to come from?"

"To be sure the old one won't fit that great Irish mare. But I'm not particular, papa. I think I could manage somehow."

"Thank you. But I'm not quite going to return into barbarism. It may be a depraved taste, but I should like to see my daughter properly mounted."

"Think of riding together down the lanes—why, the dog-roses must be all out in flower, and the honeysuckles, and the hay—how I should like to see Merriman's farm again! Papa, do let me have one ride with you! Please do. I am sure we can manage it somehow."

And "somehow" it was managed. "Somehow" all Molly's wishes came to pass; there was only one little drawback to this week of holiday and happy intercourse with her father. Everybody would ask them out to tea. They were quite like bride and bride-groom; for the fact was, that the late dinners which Mrs. Gibson had introduced into her own house, were a great inconvenience in the calculations of the small tea-drinkings at Hollingford. How ask people to tea at six, who dined at that hour? How, when they refused cake and sandwiches at half-past eight, how induce other people who were really hungry to commit a vulgarity before those calm and scornful eyes? So there had been a great lull of invitations for the Gibsons to Hollingford tea-parties. Mrs. Gibson, whose object was to squeeze herself into "county society," had taken this being left out of the smaller festivities with great equanimity; but Molly missed the kind homeliness of the parties to which she had gone from time to time as long as she could remember; and though, as each three-cornered note was brought in, she grumbled a little over the loss of another charming evening with her father, she really was glad to go again in the old way among old friends. Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe were especially compassionate towards her in her loneliness. If they had had their will she would have dined there every day; and she had to call upon them very

frequently in order to prevent their being hurt at her declining the dinners. Mrs. Gibson wrote twice during her week's absence to her husband. That piece of news was quite satisfactory to the Miss Brownings, who had of late held themselves a great deal aloof from a house where they chose to suppose that their presence was not wanted. In their winter evenings they had often talked over Mr. Gibson's household, and, having little besides conjecture to go upon, they found the subject interminable, as they could vary the possibilities every day. One of their wonders was how Mr. and Mrs. Gibson really got on together; another was whether Mrs. Gibson was extravagant or not. Now two letters during the week of her absence showed what was in those days considered a very proper amount of conjugal affection. Yet not too much—at eleven-pence-halfpenny postage. A third letter would have been extravagant. Sister looked to sister with an approving nod as Molly named the second letter, which arrived in Hollingford the very day before Mrs. Gibson was to return. They had settled between themselves that two letters would show the right amount of good feeling and proper understanding in the Gibson family: more would have been extravagant; only one would have been a mere matter of duty. There had been rather a question between Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe as to which person the second letter (supposing it came) was to be addressed to. It would be very conjugal to write twice to Mr. Gibson; and yet it would be very pretty if Molly came in for her share.

"You've had another letter, you say, my dear?" asked Miss Browning. "I daresay Mrs. Gibson has written to you this time?"

"It is a large sheet, and Cynthia has written on one half to me, and all the rest is to papa."

"A very nice arrangement, I'm sure. And what does Cynthia say? Is she enjoying herself?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. They've had a dinner-party; and one night, when mamma was at Lady Cumnor's, Cynthia went to the play with her cousins."

"Upon my word! and all in one week? I do call that dissipation. Why, Thursday would be taken up with the journey, and Friday with resting, and Sunday is Sunday all the world over; and they must have written on Tuesday. Well! I hope Cynthia won't find Hollingford dull, that's all, when she comes back."

"I don't think it's likely," said Miss Phœbe, with a little simper and a knowing look, which sate oddly on her kindly innocent face. "You see a great deal of Mr. Preston, don't you, Molly!"

"Mr. Preston!" said Molly, flushing up with surprise. "No! not much. He's been at Ashcombe all winter, you know! He has but just come back to settle here. What should make you think so?"

"Oh! a little bird told us," said Miss Browning. Molly knew that little bird from her childhood, and had always hated it, and longed to wring its neck. Why could not people speak out and say that they did not mean to give up the name of their informant? But it was a very favourite form of fiction with the Miss Brownings, and to Miss Phœbe it was the very acme of wit.

"The little bird was flying about one day in Heath Lane, and it saw Mr. Preston and a young lady—we won't say who—walking together in a very friendly manner, that is to say, he was on horseback; but the path is raised above the road, just where there is the little wooden bridge over the brook——"

"Perhaps Molly is in the secret, and we ought not to ask her about it," said Miss Phœbe, seeing Molly's extreme discomfiture and annoyance.

"It can be no great secret," said Miss Browning, dropping the little-bird formula, and assuming an air of dignified reproval at Miss Phœbe's interruption, "for Miss Hornblower says Mr. Preston owns to being engaged——"

"At any rate it is not to Cynthia, that I know positively," said Molly with some vehemence. "And pray put a stop to any such reports; you don't know what mischief they may do. I do so hate that kind of chatter!" It was not very respectful of Molly to speak in this way, to be sure, but she thought only of Roger; and the distress any such reports might cause, should he ever hear of them (in the centre of Africa!) made her colour up scarlet with vexation.

"Heighty-teighty! Miss Molly! don't you remember that I am old enough to be your mother, and that it is not pretty behaviour to speak so to us—to me! 'Chatter' to be sure. Really, Molly——"

"I beg your pardon," said Molly, only half-penitent.

"I daresay you did not mean to speak so to sister," said Miss Phœbe, trying to make peace.

Molly did not answer all at once. She wanted to explain how much mischief might be done by such reports.

"But don't you see," she went on, still flushed by vexation, "how bad it is to talk of such things in such a way? Supposing one of them cared for some one else, and that might happen, you know; Mr. Preston, for instance, may be engaged to some one else?"

"Molly! I pity the woman! Indeed I do. I have a very poor opinion of Mr. Preston," said Miss Browning, in a warning tone of voice; for a new idea had come into her head.

"Well, but the woman, or young lady, would not like to hear such reports about Mr. Preston."

"Perhaps not. But for all that, take my word for it, he's a great flirt, and young ladies had better not have much to do with him.

"I daresay it was all accident their meeting in Heath Lane," said Miss Phœbe.

"I know nothing about it," said Molly, "and I daresay I have been impertinent, only please don't talk about it any more. I have my reasons for asking you." She got up, for by the striking of the church clock she had just found out that it was later than she had thought, and she knew that her father would be at home by this time. She bent down and kissed Miss Browning's grave and passive face.

"How you are growing, Molly!" said Miss Phœbe, anxious to cover over her sister's displeasure. "As tall and as straight as a poplar-tree!" as the old song says.

"Grow in grace, Molly, as well as in good looks!" said Miss Browning, watching her out of the room. As soon as she was fairly gone, Miss Browning got up and shut the door quite securely, and then sitting down near her sister, she said, in a low voice, "Phœbe, it was Molly herself that was with Mr. Preston in Heath Lane that day when Mrs. Goodenough saw them together!"

"Gracious goodness me!" exclaimed Miss Phœbe, receiving it at once as Gospel. "How do you know?"

"By putting two and two together. Didn't you notice how red Molly went, and then pale, and how she said she knew for a fact that Mr. Preston and Cynthia Kirkpatrick were not engaged?"

"Perhaps not engaged; but Mrs. Goodenough saw them loitering together, all by their own two selves——"

"Mrs. Goodenough only crossed Heath Lane at the Shire Oak,

as she was riding in her phaeton," said Miss Browning sententiously. "We all know what a coward she is in a carriage, so that most likely she had only half her wits about her, and her eyes are none of the best when she is standing steady on the ground. Molly and Cynthia have got their new plaid shawls just alike, and they trim their bonnets alike, and Molly is grown as tall as Cynthia since Christmas. I was always afraid she'd be short and stumpy, but she's now as tall and slender as any one need be. I'll answer for it, Mrs. Good-enough saw Molly, and took her for Cynthia.

When Miss Browning "answered for it" Miss Phœbe gave up doubting. She sate some time in silence revolving her thoughts. Then she said :

"It wouldn't be such a very bad match after all, sister." She spoke very meekly, awaiting her sister's sanction to her opinion.

"Phœbe, it would be a bad match for Mary Pearson's daughter. If I had known what I know now we'd never have had him to tea last September."

"Why, what do you know?" asked Miss Phœbe.

"Miss Hornblower told me many things ; some that I don't think you ought to hear, Phœbe. He was engaged to a very pretty Miss Gregson, at Henwick, where he comes from ; and her father made inquiries, and heard so much that was bad about him, that he made his daughter break off the match, and she's dead since!"

"How shocking!" said Miss Phœbe, duly impressed.

"Besides, he plays at billiards, and he bets at races, and some people do say he keeps race-horses."

"But is not it strange that the earl keeps him on as his agent?"

"No! perhaps not. He's very clever about land, and very sharp in all law affairs; and my lord isn't bound to take notice—if indeed he knows—of the manner in which Mr. Preston talks when he has taken too much wine."

"Taken too much wine. Oh, sister, is he a drunkard? and we have had him to tea!"

"I didn't say he was a drunkard, Phœbe," said Miss Browning, pettishly. "A man may take too much wine occasionally, without being a drunkard. Don't let me hear you using such coarse words, Phœbe!"

Miss Phœbe was silent for a time after this rebuke.

Presently she said, "I do hope it wasn't Molly Gibson."

"You may hope as much as you like, but I'm pretty sure it was.

However, we'd better say nothing about it to Mrs. Goodenough ; she has got Cynthia into her head, and there let her rest. Time enough to set reports afloat about Molly when we know there's some truth in them. Mr. Preston might do for Cynthia, who's been brought up in France, though she has such pretty manners ; but it may have made her not particular. He must not, and he shall not, have Molly, if I go into church and forbid the banns myself; but I'm afraid—I'm afraid there's something between her and him. We must keep on the look-out, Phœbe. I'll be her guardian angel, in spite of herself."

CHAPTER XII.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

Mrs. Gibson came back full of rose-coloured accounts of London. Lady Cumnor had been gracious and affectionate, "so touched by my going up to see her so soon after her return to England," Lady Harriet charming and devoted to her old governess, Lord Cumnor "just like his dear usual hearty self;" and as for the Kirkpatricks, no Lord Chancellor's house was ever grander than theirs, and the silk gown of the Q.C. had floated over housemaids and footmen. Cynthia, too, was so much admired; and as for her dress, Mrs. Kirkpatrick had showered down ball-dresses and wreaths, and pretty bonnets and mantles, like a fairy godmother. Mr. Gibson's poor present of ten pounds shrank into very small dimensions compared with all this munificence.

"And they're so fond of her, I don't know when we shall have her back," was Mrs. Gibson's winding-up sentence. "And now, Molly, what have you and papa been doing? Very gay, you sounded in your letter. I had not time to read it in London; so I put in my pocket, and read it in the coach coming home. But, my dear child, you do look so old-fashioned with your gown made all tight, and your hair all tumbling about in curls. Curls are quite gone out. We must do your hair differently," she continued, trying to smooth Molly's black waves into straightness.

"I sent Cynthia an African letter," said Molly, timidly. "Did you hear anything of what was in it?"

"Oh, yes, poor child! It made her very uneasy, I think; she said she did not feel inclined to go to Mr. Rawson's ball, which was on that night, and for which Mrs. Kirkpatrick had given her the ball-dress. But there was really nothing for her to fidget herself about. Roger only said he had had another touch of fever, but

was better when he wrote. He says every European has to be acclimatized by fever in that part of Abyssinia where he is."

"And did she go?" asked Molly.

"Yes, to be sure. It is not an engagement; and if it were, it is not acknowledged. Fancy her going and saying, 'A young man that I know has been ill for a few days in Africa, two months ago, therefore I don't want to go to the ball to-night.' It would have seemed like affectation of sentiment; and if there's one thing I hate it is that."

"She would hardly enjoy herself," said Molly.

"Oh, yes, but she did. Her dress was white gauze, trimmed with lilacs, and she really did look—a mother may be allowed a little natural partiality—most lovely. And she danced every dance, although she was quite a stranger. I am sure she enjoyed herself, from her manner of talking about it next morning."

"I wonder if the squire knows."

"Knows what? Oh, yes, to be sure! You mean about Roger. I daresay he doesn't, and there's no need to tell him, for I've no doubt it is all right now." And she went out of the room to finish her unpacking.

Molly let her work fall, and sighed. "It will be a year the day after to-morrow since he came here to propose our going to Hurst Wood, and mamma was so vexed at his calling before lunch. I wonder if Cynthia remembers it as well as I do. And now, perhaps—— Oh! Roger, Roger! I wish—I pray that you were safe home again! How could we all bear it, if——"

She covered her face with her hands, and tried to stop thinking. Suddenly she got up, as if stung by a venomous fancy.

"I don't believe she loves him as she ought, or she could not—could not have gone and danced. What shall I do if she does not? What shall I do? I can bear anything but that."

But she found the long suspense as to his health hard enough to endure. They were not likely to hear from him for a month at least, and before that time had elapsed Cynthia would be at home again. Molly learnt to long for her return before a fortnight of her absence was over. She had had no idea that perpetual tête-à-têtes with Mrs. Gibson could, by any possibility, be so tiresome as she found them. Perhaps Molly's state of delicate health, consequent upon her rapid growth during the last few months, made her irritable; but really often she had to get up and leave the room to calm

herself down after listening to a long series of words, more frequently plaintive or discontented in tone than cheerful, and which at the end conveyed no distinct impression of either the speaker's thought or feeling. Whenever anything had gone wrong, whenever Mr. Gibson had coolly persevered in anything to which she had objected; whenever the cook had made a mistake about the dinner, or the housemaid broken any little frangible article; whenever Molly's hair was not done to her liking, or her dress did not become her, or the smell of dinner pervaded the house, or the wrong callers came, or the right callers did not come—in fact, whenever anything went wrong, poor Mr. Kirkpatrick was regretted and mourned over, nay, almost blamed, as if, had he only given himself the trouble of living, he could have helped it.

"When I look back to those happy days, it seems to me as if I had never valued them as I ought. To be sure—youth, love,—what did we care for poverty! I remember dear Mr. Kirkpatrick walking five miles into Stratford to buy me a muffin because I had such a fancy for one after Cynthia was born. I don't mean to complain of dear papa—but I don't think—but, perhaps I ought not to say it to you. If Mr. Kirkpatrick had but taken care of that cough of his; but he was so obstinate! Men always are, I think. And it really was selfish of him. Only I daresay he did not consider the forlorn state in which I should be left. It came harder upon me than upon most people, because I always was of such an affectionate sensitive nature. I remember a little poem of Mr. Kirkpatrick's, in which he compared my heart to a harpstring, vibrating to the slightest breeze."

"I thought harpstrings required a pretty strong finger to make them sound," said Molly.

"My dear child, you've no more poetry in you than your father. And as for your hair! it's worse than ever. Can't you drench it in water to take those untidy twists and twirls out of it?"

"It only makes it curl more and more when it gets dry," said Molly, sudden tears coming into her eyes as a recollection came before her like a picture seen long ago and forgotten for years—a young mother washing and dressing her little girl; placing the half-naked darling on her knee, and twining the wet rings of dark hair fondly round her fingers, and then, in an ecstasy of fondness, kissing the little curly head.

The receipt of Cynthia's letters made very agreeable events.

She did not write often, but her letters were tolerably long when they did come, and very sprightly in tone. There was constant mention made of many new names, which conveyed no idea to Molly, though Mrs. Gibson would try and enlighten her by running commentaries like the following :—

"Mrs. Green! ah, that's Mr. Jones's pretty cousin, who lives in Russell Square with the fat husband. They keep their carriage; but I'm not sure if it is not Mr. Green who is Mrs. Jones's cousin. We can ask Cynthia when she comes home. Mr. Henderson! to be sure—a young man with black whiskers, a pupil of Mr. Kirkpatrick's formerly,—or was he a pupil of Mr. Murray's? I know they said he had read law with somebody. Ah, yes! they are the people who called the day after Mr. Rawson's ball, and who admired Cynthia so much, without knowing I was her mother. She was very handsomely dressed indeed, in black satin; and the son had a glass eye, but he was a young man of good property. Coleman! yes, that was the name."

No more news of Roger until some time after Cynthia had returned from her London visit. She came back looking fresher and prettier than ever, beautifully dressed, thanks to her own good taste, and her cousin's generosity, full of amusing details of the gay life she had been enjoying, yet not at all out of spirits at having left it behind her. She brought home all sorts of pretty and dainty devices for Molly; a neck-ribbon made up in the newest fashion, a pattern for a tippet, a delicate pair of tight gloves, embroidered as Molly had never seen gloves embroidered before, and many another little sign of remembrance during her absence. Yet somehow or other, Molly felt that Cynthia was changed in her relation to her. Molly was aware that she had never had Cynthia's full confidence, for with all her apparent frankness and *naïveté* of manner, Cynthia was extremely reserved and reticent. She knew this much of herself, and had often laughed about it to Molly, and the latter had by this time found out the truth of her friend's assertion. But Molly did not trouble herself much about it. She too knew that there were many thoughts and feelings that flitted through her mind which she should never think of telling to any one, except perhaps —if they were ever very much thrown together—to her father. She knew that Cynthia withheld from her more than thoughts and feelings—that she withheld facts. But then, as Molly reflected, these facts might involve details of struggle and suffering—might

relate to her mother's neglect—and altogether be of so painful a character, that it would be well if Cynthia could forget her childhood altogether, instead of fixing it in her mind by the relation of her grievances and troubles. So it was not now by any want of confidence that Molly felt distanced as it were. It was because Cynthia rather avoided than sought her companionship; because her eyes shunned the straight, serious, loving look of Molly's; because there were certain subjects on which she evidently disliked speaking, not particularly interesting things as far as Molly could perceive, but it almost seemed as if they lay on the road to points to be avoided. Molly felt a sort of sighing pleasure in noticing Cynthia's changed manner of talking about Roger. She spoke of him tenderly now; "poor Roger," as she called him; and Molly thought that she must be referring to the illness which he had mentioned in his last letter. One morning in the first week after Cynthia's return home, just as he was going out, Mr. Gibson ran up into the drawing-room, booted and spurred, and hastily laid an open pamphlet down before her; pointing out a particular passage with his finger, but not speaking a word before he rapidly quitted the room. His eyes were sparkling, and had an amused as well as pleased expression. All this Molly noticed, as well as Cynthia's flush of colour as she read what was thus pointed out to her. Then she pushed it a little on one side, not closing the book, however, and went on with her work.

"What is it? may I see it?" asked Molly, stretching out her hand for the pamphlet, which lay within her reach. But she did not take it until Cynthia had said—

"Certainly; I don't suppose there are any great secrets in a scientific journal, full of reports of meetings." And she gave the book a little push towards Molly.

"Oh, Cynthia!" said Molly, catching her breath as she read, "are you not proud?" For it was an account of an annual gathering of the Geographical Society, and Lord Hollingford had read a letter he had received from Roger Hamley, dated from Arracuoba, a district in Arica, hitherto unvisited by any intelligent European traveller; and about which Mr. Hamley sent many curious particulars. The reading of this letter had been received with the greatest interest, and several subsequent speakers had paid the writer very high compliments.

But Molly might have known Cynthia better than to expect an

answer responsive to the feelings that prompted her question. Let Cynthia be ever so proud, ever so glad, or so grateful, or even indignant, remorseful, grievous or sorry, the very fact that she was expected by another to entertain any of these emotions, would have been enough to prevent her expressing them.

"I'm afraid I'm not as much struck by the wonder of the thing as you are, Molly. Besides, it is not news to me; at least, not entirely. I heard about the meeting before I left London; it was a good deal talked about in my uncle's set; to be sure, I didn't hear all the fine things they say of him there—but there, you know, that's a mere fashion of speaking, which means nothing; somebody is bound to pay compliments when a lord takes the trouble to read one of his letters aloud."

"Nonsense," said Molly. "You know you don't believe what you are saying, Cynthia."

Cynthia gave that pretty little jerk of her shoulders, which was her equivalent for a French shrug, but did not lift up her head from her sewing. Molly began to read the report over again.

"Why, Cynthia!" she said, "you might have been there; ladies were there. It says 'many ladies were present.' Oh, couldn't you have managed to go? If your uncle's set cared about these things, wouldn't some of them have taken you?"

"Perhaps, if I had asked them. But I think they would have been rather astonished at my sudden turn for science."

"You might have told your uncle how matters really stood, he would not have talked about it if you had wished him not, I am sure, and he could have helped you."

"Once for all, Molly," said Cynthia, now laying down her work, and speaking with quick authority, "do learn to understand that it is, and always has been my wish, not to have the relation which Roger and I bear to each other, mentioned or talked about. When the right time comes, I will make it known to my uncle, and to everybody whom it may concern; but I am not going to make mischief, and get myself into trouble—even for the sake of hearing compliments paid to him—by letting it out before the time. If I'm pushed to it, I'd sooner break it off altogether at once, and have done with it. I can't be worse off than I am now." Her angry tone had changed into a kind of desponding complaint before she had ended her sentence. Molly looked at her with dismay.

"I can't understand you, Cynthia," she said at length.

"No; I daresay you can't," said Cynthia, looking at her with tears in her eyes, and very tenderly, as if in atonement for her late vehemence. "I am afraid—I hope you never will."

In a moment, Molly's arms were round her. "Oh, Cynthia," she murmured, "have I been plaguing you? Have I vexed you? Don't say you're afraid of my knowing you. Of course you've your faults, everybody has, but I think I love you the better for them."

"I don't know that I am so very bad," said Cynthia, smiling a little through the tears that Molly's words and caresses had forced to overflow from her eyes. "But I've got into scrapes. I'm in a scrape now. I do sometimes believe I shall always be in scrapes, and if they ever come to light, I shall seem to be worse than I really am; and I know your father will throw me off, and I—no, I won't be afraid that you will, Molly."

"I'm sure I won't. Are they—do you think—how would Roger take it?" asked Molly, very timidly.

"I don't know. I hope he will never hear of it. I don't see why he should, for in a little while I shall be quite clear again. It all came about without my ever thinking I was doing wrong. I've a great mind to tell you all about it, Molly."

Molly did not like to urge it, though she longed to know, and to see if she could not offer help; but while Cynthia was hesitating, and perhaps, to say the truth, rather regretting that she had even made this slight advance towards bestowing her confidence, Mrs. Gibson came in, full of some manner of altering a gown of hers, so as to make it into the fashion of the day, as she had seen it during her visit to London. Cynthia seemed to forget her tears and her troubles, and to throw her own soul into millinery.

Cynthia's correspondence went on pretty briskly with her London cousins, according to the usual rate of correspondence in those days. Indeed, Mrs. Gibson was occasionally inclined to complain of the frequency of Helen Kirkpatrick's letters; for before the penny post came in, the recipient had to pay the postage of letters; and elevenpence-halfpenny three times a week came, according to Mrs. Gibson's mode of reckoning when annoyed, to a sum "between three and four shillings." But these complaints were only for the family; they saw the wrong side of the tapestry. Hollingford in general, Miss Brownings in particular, heard of "dear Helen's enthusiastic friendship for Cynthia," and of "the real pleasure it was to receive such

constant news—relays of news indeed—from London. It was almost as good as living there!"

"A great deal better I should think," said Miss Browning with some severity. For she had got many of her notions of the metropolis from the British Essayists, where town is so often represented as the centre of dissipation, corrupting country wives and squires' daughters, and unfitting them for all their duties by the constant whirl of its not always innocent pleasures. London was a sort of moral pitch, which few could touch and not be defiled. Miss Browning had been on the watch for the signs of deterioration in Cynthia's character ever since her return home. But, except in a greater number of pretty and becoming articles of dress, there was no great change for the worse to be perceived. Cynthia had been "in the world," had "beheld the glare and glitter and dazzling display of London," yet had come back to Hollingford as ready as ever to place a chair for Miss Browning, or to gather flowers for a nosegay for Miss Phœbe, or to mend her own clothes. But all this was set down to the merits of Cynthia, not to the credit of London-town.

"As far as I can judge of London," said Miss Browning, sententiously continuing her tirade against the place, "it's no better than a pickpocket and a robber dressed up in the spoils of honest folk. I should like to know where my Lord Hollingford was bred, and Mr. Roger Hamley. Your good husband lent me that report of the meeting, Mrs. Gibson, where so much was said about them both, and he was as proud of their praises as if he had been akin to them, and Phœbe read it aloud to me, for the print was too small for my eyes; she was a good deal perplexed with all the new names of places, but I said she'd better skip them, for we had never heard of them before and probably should never hear of them again, but she read out the fine things they said of my lord, and Mr. Roger, and I put it to you, where were they born and bred? Why, within eight miles of Hollingford; it might have been Molly there or me; it's all a chance; and then they go and talk about the pleasures of intellectual society in London, and the distinguished people up there that it is such an advantage to know, and all the time I know it's only shops and the play that's the real attraction. But that's neither here nor there. We all put our best foot foremost, and if we have a reason to give that looks sensible we speak it out like men, and never say anything about the silliness we are hugging to our heart. But I ask you again, where does this fine society come from, and these wise

n, and these distinguished travellers? Why, out of country ishes like this ! London picks 'em all up, and decks herself with m, and then calls out to the folks she's robbed, and says, 'Come l see how fine I am.' Fine, indeed! I've no patience with Lon- ı: Cynthia is much better out of it ; and I'm not sure, if I were ı, Mrs. Gibson, if I wouldn't stop up those London letters : y'll only be unsettling her."

"But perhaps she may live in London some of these days, Miss owning," simpered Mrs. Gibson.

"Time enough then to be thinking of London. I wish her an iest country husband with enough to live upon, and a little to lay and a good character to boot. Mind that, Molly," said she, firing ınd upon the startled Molly; "I wish Cynthia a husband with a od character; but she's got a mother to look after her; you've ıe, and when your mother was alive she was a dear friend of mine: I'm not going to let you throw yourself away upon any one whose isn't clear and aboveboard, you may depend upon it!"

This last speech fell like a bomb into the quiet little drawing- m, it was delivered with such vehemence. Miss Browning, in her ret heart, meant it as a warning against the intimacy she believed t Molly had formed with Mr. Preston; but as it happened that lly had never dreamed of any such intimacy, the girl could imagine why such severity of speech should be addressed to her. s. Gibson, who always took up the points of every word or action ere they touched her own self (and called it sensitiveness), oke the silence that followed Miss Browning's speech by saying, intively,—

"I'm sure, Miss Browning, you are very much mistaken if you nk that any mother could take more care of Molly than I do. I n't—I can't think there is any need for any one to interfere to pro- t her, and I have not an idea why you have been talking in this y, just as if we were all wrong, and you were all right. It ts my feelings, indeed it does; for Molly can tell you there is not ning or a favour that Cynthia has, that she has not. And as for taking care of her, why, if she were to go up to London to-mor- , I should make a point of going with her to see after her; and ever did it for Cynthia when she was at school in France; and bedroom is furnished just like Cynthia's, and I let her wear my shawl whenever she likes, she might have it oftener if she would. ın't think what you mean, Miss Browning."

"I did not mean to offend you, but I meant just to give Molly a hint. She understands what I mean."

"I'm sure I do not," said Molly, boldly. "I haven't a notion what you meant, if you were alluding to anything more than you said straight out,—that you do not wish me to marry any one who hasn't a good character, and that, as you were a friend of mamma's, you would prevent my marrying a man with a bad character, by every means in your power. I'm not thinking of marrying; I don't want to marry anybody at all, but if I did, and he were not a good man, I should thank you for coming and warning me of it."

"I shall not stand on warning you, Molly. I shall forbid the banns in church, if need be," said Miss Browning, half convinced of the clear transparent truth of what Molly had said; blushing all over, it is true, but with her steady eyes fixed on Miss Browning's face while she spoke.

"Do!" said Molly.

"Well, well, I won't say any more. Perhaps I was mistaken. We won't say any more about it. But remember what I have said, Molly; there's no harm in that, at any rate. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Mrs. Gibson. As stepmothers go, I think you try and do your duty. Good morning. Good-by to you both, and God bless you."

If Miss Browning thought that her final blessing would secure peace in the room she was leaving, she was very much mistaken; Mrs. Gibson burst out with,—

"Try and do my duty, indeed! I should be much obliged to you, Molly, if you would take care not to behave in such a manner as to bring down upon me such impertinence as I have just been receiving from Miss Browning."

"But I don't know what made her talk as she did, mamma," said Molly.

"I'm sure I don't know, and I don't care either. But I know that I never was spoken to as if I was trying to do my duty before, —'trying' indeed! everybody always knew that I did it, without talking about it before my face in that rude manner. I've that deep feeling about duty that I think it ought only to be talked about in church, and in such sacred places as that; not to have a common caller startling one with it, even though she was an early friend of your mother's. And as if I didn't look after you quite as much as I look after Cynthia! Why, it was only yesterday I went up into

Cynthia's room and found her reading a letter that she put away in a hurry as soon as I came in, and I didn't even ask her who it was from, and I'm sure I should have made you tell me."

Very likely. Mrs. Gibson shrank from any conflicts with Cynthia, pretty sure that she would be worsted in the end; while Molly generally submitted sooner than have any struggle for her own will.

Just then Cynthia came in.

"What's the matter?" said she quickly, seeing that something was wrong.

"Why, Molly has been doing something which has set that impertinent Miss Browning off into lecturing me on trying to do my duty! If your poor father had but lived, Cynthia, I should never have been spoken to as I have been. 'A stepmother trying to do her duty, indeed!' That was Miss Browning's expression."

Any allusion to her father took from Cynthia all desire of irony. She came forward, and again asked Molly what was the matter.

Molly, herself ruffled, made answer,—

"Miss Browning seemed to think I was likely to marry some one whose character was objectionable——"

"You, Molly?" said Cynthia.

"Yes—she once before spoke to me,—I suspect she has got some notion about Mr. Preston in her head——"

Cynthia sate down quite suddenly. Molly went on: "And she spoke as if mamma did not look enough after me,—I think she was rather provoking——"

"Not rather, but very—very impertinent," said Mrs. Gibson, a little soothed by Molly's recognition of her grievance.

"What could have put it into her head?" said Cynthia, very quietly, taking her sewing as she spoke.

"I don't know," said her mother, replying to the question after her own fashion. "I'm sure I don't always approve of Mr. Preston; but even if it was him she was thinking about, he's far more agreeable than she is; and I had much rather have him coming to call than an old maid like her any day."

"I don't know that it was Mr. Preston she was thinking about," said Molly. "It was only a guess. When you were both in London she spoke about him,—I thought she had heard something about you and him, Cynthia." Unseen by her mother Cynthia looked up at Molly, her eyes full of prohibition, her cheeks full of angry

colour. Molly stopped short suddenly. After that look she was surprised at the quietness with which Cynthia said, almost immediately,—

"Well, after all, it is only your fancy that she was alluding to Mr. Preston, so perhaps we had better not say any more about him; and as for her advice to mamma to look after you better, Miss Molly, I'll stand bail for your good behaviour; for both mamma and I know you're the last person to do any foolish things in that way. And now don't let us talk any more about it. I was coming to tell you that Hannah Brand's little boy has been badly burnt, and his sister is downstairs asking for old linen."

Mrs. Gibson was always kind to poor people, and she immediately got up and went to her stores to search for the article wanted.

Cynthia turned quietly round to Molly.

"Molly, pray don't ever allude to anything between me and Mr. Preston,—not to mamma, nor to any one. Never do! I've a reason for it,—don't say anything more about it, ever."

Mrs. Gibson came back at this moment, and Molly had to stop short again on the brink of Cynthia's confidence; uncertain indeed this time, whether she would have been told anything more, and only sure that she had annoyed Cynthia a good deal.

But the time was approaching when she would know all.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORM BURSTS.

The autumn drifted away through all its seasons. The golden corn-harvest, the walks through the stubble-fields, and rambles into hazel-copses in search of nuts; the stripping of the apple-orchards of their ruddy fruit, amid the joyous cries and shouts of watching children; and the gorgeous tulip-like colouring of the later time had now come on with the shortening days. There was comparative silence in the land, excepting for the distant shots, and the whirr of the partridges as they rose up from the field.

Ever since Miss Browning's unlucky conversation things had been ajar in the Gibsons' house. Cynthia seemed to keep every one out at (mental) arms'-length; and particularly avoided any private talks with Molly. Mrs. Gibson, still cherishing a grudge against Miss Browning for her implied accusation of not looking enough after Molly, chose to exercise a most wearying supervision over the poor girl. It was, "Where have you been, child?" "Who did you see?" "Who was that letter from?" "Why were you so long out when you had only to go to so-and-so?" just as if Molly had really been detected in carrying on some underhand intercourse. She answered every question asked of her with the simple truthfulness of perfect innocence; but the inquiries (although she read their motive, and knew that they arose from no especial suspicion of her conduct, but only that Mrs. Gibson might be able to say that she looked well after her stepdaughter,) chafed her inexpressibly. Very often she did not go out at all, sooner than have to give a plan of her intended proceedings, when perhaps she had no plan whatever,—only thought of wandering out at her own sweet will, and of taking pleasure in the bright solemn fading of the year. It was a very heavy time for Molly,—zest and life had fled, and left so many of the old delights mere shells of seeming. She thought it was that

her youth had fled; at nineteen! Cynthia was no longer the same, somehow: and perhaps Cynthia's change would injure her in the distant Roger's opinion. Her stepmother seemed almost kind in comparison with Cynthia's withdrawal of her heart; Mrs. Gibson worried her, to be sure, with all these forms of watching over her; but in every other way, she, at any rate, was the same. Yet Cynthia herself seemed anxious and care-worn, though she would not speak of her anxieties to Molly. And then the poor girl in her goodness would blame herself for feeling Cynthia's change of manner; for as Molly said to herself, "If it is hard work for me to help always fretting after Roger, and wondering where he is, and how he is, what must it be for her?"

One day Mr. Gibson came in, bright and swift.

"Molly," said he, "where's Cynthia?"

"Gone out to do some errands——"

"Well, it's a pity—but never mind. Put on your bonnet and cloak as fast as you can. I've had to borrow old Simpson's dog-cart,—there would have been room both for you and Cynthia; but as it is, you must walk back alone. I'll drive you as far on the Barford Road as I can, and then you must jump down. I can't take you on to Broadhurst's, I may be kept there for hours."

Mrs. Gibson was out of the room; out of the house it might be, for all Molly cared, now she had her father's leave and command. Her bonnet and cloak were on in two minutes, and she was sitting by her father's side, the back seat shut up, and the light weight going swiftly and merrily bumping over the stone-paved lanes.

"Oh, this is charming!" said Molly, after a toss-up on her seat from a tremendous bump.

"For youth, but not for crabbed age," said Mr. Gibson. "My bones are getting rheumatic, and would rather go smoothly over macadamized streets."

"That's treason to this lovely view and this fine pure air, papa. Only I don't believe you."

"Thank you. As you are so complimentary, I think I shall put you down at the foot of this hill; we have passed the second milestone from Hollingford."

"Oh, let me just go up to the top! I know we can see the blue range of the Malverns from it, and Dorrimer Hall among the woods; the horse will want a minute's rest, and then I will get down without a word."

She went up to the top of the hill ; and there they sate still a minute or two, enjoying the view, without much speaking. The woods were golden ; the old house of purple-red brick, with its twisted chimneys, rose up from among them facing on to green lawns, and a placid lake ; beyond again were the Malvern Hills !

"Now jump down, lassie, and make the best of your way home before it gets dark. You'll find the cut over Croston Heath shorter than the road we've come by."

To go to Croston Heath, Molly had to go down a narrow lane overshadowed by trees, with picturesque old cottages dotted here and there on the steep sandy banks ; and then there came a small wood, and then there was a brook to be crossed on a plank-bridge, and up the steeper fields on the opposite side were cut steps in the turfy path ; which ended, she was on Croston Heath, a wide-stretching common skirted by labourers' dwellings, past which a near road to Hollingford lay.

The loneliest part of the road was the first—the lane, the wood, the little bridge, and the clambering through the upland fields. But Molly cared little for loneliness. She went along the lane under the overarching elm-branches, from which, here and there, a yellow leaf came floating down upon her very dress ; past the last cottage where a little child had tumbled down the sloping bank, and was publishing the accident with frightened cries. Molly stooped to pick it up, and taking it in her arms in a manner which caused intense surprise to take the place of alarm in its little breast, she carried it up the rough flag steps towards the cottage which she supposed to be its home. The mother came running in from the garden behind the house, still holding the late damsons she had been gathering in her apron ; but, on seeing her, the little creature held out its arms to go to her, and she dropped her damsons all about as she took it, and began to soothe it as it cried afresh, interspersing her lulling with thanks to Molly. She called her by her name ; and on Molly asking the woman how she came to know it, she replied that she had been a servant of Mrs. Goodenough before her marriage, and so was "bound to know Dr. Gibson's daughter by sight." After the exchange of two or three more words, Molly ran down into the lane, and pursued her way, stopping here and there to gather a nosegay of such leaves as struck her for their brilliant colouring. She entered the wood. As she turned a corner in the lonely path, she heard a passionate voice of distress ; and in an

instant she recognized Cynthia's tones. She stood still and looked around. There was some thick holly-bushes shining out dark green in the midst of the amber and scarlet foliage. If any one was there, it must be behind these. So Molly left the path, and went straight, plunging through the brown tangled growth of ferns and underwood, and turned the holly bushes. There stood Mr. Preston and Cynthia; he holding her hands tight, each looking as if just silenced in some vehement talk by the rustle of Molly's footsteps.

For an instant no one spoke. Then Cynthia said,—

"Oh, Molly, Molly, come and judge between us!"

Mr. Preston let go Cynthia's hands slowly, with a look that was more of a sneer than a smile; and yet he, too, had been strongly agitated, whatever was the subject in dispute. Molly came forward and took Cynthia's arm, her eyes steadily fixed on Mr. Preston's face. It was fine to see the fearlessness of her perfect innocence. He could not bear her look, and said to Cynthia,—

"The subject of our conversation does not well admit of a third person's presence. As Miss Gibson seems to wish for your company now, I must beg you to fix some other time and place where we can finish our discussion."

"I will go if Cynthia wishes me," said Molly.

"No, no; stay—I want you to stay—I want you to hear it all—I wish I had told you sooner."

"You mean that you regret that she has not been made aware of our engagement—that you promised long ago to be my wife. Pray remember that it was you who made me promise secrecy, not I you!"

"I don't believe him, Cynthia. Don't, don't cry if you can help it; I don't believe him."

"Cynthia," said he, suddenly changing his tone to fervid tenderness, "pray, pray do not go on so; you can't think how it distresses me!" He stepped forward to try and take her hand and soothe her; but she shrank away from him, and sobbed the more irrepressibly. She felt Molly's presence so much to be a protection that now she dared to let herself go, and weaken herself by giving way to her emotion.

"Go away!" said Molly. "Don't you see you make her worse?" But he did not stir; he was looking at Cynthia so intently that he did not seem even to hear her. "Go," said Molly,

"Oh, Molly, Molly, come and judge between us!"

vehemently, "if it really distresses you to see her cry. Don't you see, it's you who are the cause of it?"

"I will go if Cynthia tells me," said he at length.

"Oh, Molly, I don't know what to do," said Cynthia, taking down her hands from her tear-stained face, and appealing to Molly, and sobbing worse than ever; in fact, she became hysterical, and though she tried to speak coherently, no intelligible words would come.

"Run to that cottage in the trees, and fetch her a cup of water," said Molly. He hesitated a little.

"Why don't you go?" said Molly, impatiently.

"I have not done speaking to her; you will not leave before I come back?"

"No. Don't you see she can't move in this state?"

He went quickly, if reluctantly.

Cynthia was some time before she could check her sobs enough to speak. At length she said,—

"Molly, I do hate him!"

"But what did he mean by saying you were engaged to him? Don't cry, dear, but tell me; if I can help you I will, but I can't imagine what it all really is."

"It is too long a story to tell now, and I'm not strong enough. Look! he is coming back. As soon as I can, let us get home."

"With all my heart," said Molly.

He brought the water, and Cynthia drank, and was restored to calmness.

"Now," said Molly, "we had better go home as fast as you can manage it; it is getting dark quickly."

If she hoped to carry Cynthia off so easily she was mistaken. Mr. Preston was resolute on this point. He said—

"I think, since Miss Gibson has made herself acquainted with this much, we had better let her know the whole truth—that you are engaged to marry me as soon as you are twenty; otherwise you're being here with me, and by appointment too, may appear strange—even equivocal to her."

"As I know that Cynthia is engaged to another man, you can hardly expect me to believe what you say, Mr. Preston."

"Oh, Molly," said Cynthia, trembling all over, but trying to be calm, "I am not engaged—neither to the person you mean, nor to Mr. Preston."

Mr. Preston forced a smile. "I think I have some letters that

would convince Miss Gibson of the truth of what I have said; and which will convince Mr. Osborne Hamley, if necessary—I conclude it is to him she is alluding."

"I am quite puzzled by you both," said Molly. "The only thing I do know is, that we ought not to be standing here at this time of evening, and that Cynthia and I shall go home directly. If you want to talk to Miss Kirkpatrick, Mr. Preston, why don't you come to my father's house, and ask to see her openly, and like a gentleman."

"I am perfectly willing," said he; "I shall only be too glad to explain to Mr. Gibson on what terms I stand in relation to her. If I have not done it sooner, it is because I have yielded to her wishes."

"Pray, pray don't, Molly—you don't know all—you don't know anything about it; you mean well and kindly, I know, but you are only making mischief. I am quite well enough to walk, do let us go; I will tell you all about it when we are at home." She took Molly's arm and tried to hasten her away; but Mr. Preston followed, talking as he walked by their side.

"I do not know what you will say at home; but can you deny that you are my promised wife? Can you deny that it has only been at your earnest request that I have kept the engagement secret so long?" He was unwise—Cynthia stopped, and turned at bay.

"Since you will have it out,—since I must speak here, I own that what you say is literally true; that when I was a neglected girl of sixteen, you—whom I believed to be a friend, lent me money at my need, and made me give you a promise of marriage."

"Made you!" said he, laying an emphasis on the first word.

Cynthia turned scarlet. "Made is not the right word. I confess I liked you then—you were almost my only friend—and, if it had been a question of immediate marriage, I daresay I should never have objected. But I know you better now; and you have persecuted me so of late, that I tell you once for all (as I have told you before, till I am sick of the very words), that nothing shall ever make me marry you. Nothing! I see there's no chance of escaping exposure and, I daresay, losing my character, and I know losing all the few friends I have."

"Never me," said Molly, touched by the wailing tone of despair that Cynthia was falling into.

"It is hard," said Mr. Preston. "You may believe all the bad things you like about me, Cynthia, but I don't think you can doubt my real, passionate, disinterested love for you."

"I do doubt it," said Cynthia, breaking out with fresh energy. "Ah! when I think of the self-denying affection I have seen—I have known—affection that thought of others before itself——"

Mr. Preston broke in at the pause she made. She was afraid of revealing too much to him.

"You do not call it love which has been willing to wait for years—to be silent while silence was desired—to suffer jealousy and to bear neglect, relying on the solemn promise of a girl of sixteen—for solemn say flimsy, when that girl grows older. Cynthia, I have loved you, and I do love you, and I can't give you up. If you will but keep your word, and marry me, I'll swear I'll make you love me in return."

"Oh, I wish—I wish I'd never borrowed that unlucky money, it was the beginning of it all. Oh, Molly, I have saved and scrimped to repay it, and he won't take it now; I thought if I could but repay it would set me free."

"You seem to imply you sold yourself for twenty pounds," he said. They were nearly on the common now, close to the protection of the cottages, in very hearing of their inmates; if neither of the other two thought of this Molly did, and resolved in her mind to call in at one of them, and ask for the labourer's protection home; at any rate his presence must put a stop to this miserable altercation.

"I did not sell myself; I liked you then. But oh, how I do hate you now!" cried Cynthia, unable to contain her words.

He bowed and turned back, vanishing rapidly down the field staircase. At any rate that was a relief. Yet the two girls hastened on, as if he was still pursuing them. Once, when Molly said something to Cynthia, the latter replied—

"Molly, if you pity me—if you love me—don't say anything more just now. We shall have to look as if nothing had happened when we get home. Come to my room when we go upstairs to bed, and I'll tell you all. I know you'll blame me terribly, but I will tell you all."

So Molly did not say another word till they reached home; and then, comparatively at ease, inasmuch as no one perceived how late was their return to the house, each of the girls went up into their separate rooms, to rest and calm themselves before dressing for the necessary family gathering at dinner. Molly felt as if she were so miserably shaken that she could not have gone down at all, if her own interests only had been at stake. She sate by her dressing-table,

holding her head in her hands, her candles unlighted, and the room in soft darkness, trying to still her beating heart, and to recall all she had heard, and what would be its bearing on the lives of those whom she loved. Roger. Oh, Roger!—far away in mysterious darkness of distance—loving as he did—(ah, that was love! That was the love to which Cynthia had referred, as worthy of the name!) and the object of his love claimed by another—false to one she must be! How could it be? What would he think and feel if ever he came to know it? It was of no use trying to imagine his pain—that he could do no good. What lay before Molly was, to try and extricate Cynthia, if she could help her by thought, or advice, or action; not to weaken herself by letting her fancy run into pictures of possible, probable suffering.

When she went into the drawing-room before dinner, she found Cynthia and her mother by themselves. There were candles in the room, but they were not lighted, for the wood-fire blazed merrily and fitfully, and they were awaiting Mr. Gibson's return, which might be expected at any minute. Cynthia sate in the shade, so it was only by her sensitive ear that Molly could judge of her state of composure. Mrs. Gibson was telling some of her day's adventures—whom she had found at home in the calls she had been making; who had been out; and the small pieces of news she had heard. To Molly's quick sympathy Cynthia's voice sounded languid and weary, but she made all the proper replies, and expressed the proper interest at the right places, and Molly came to the rescue, chiming in, with an effort, it is true; but Mrs. Gibson was not one to notice slight shades or differences in manner. When Mr. Gibson returned, the relative positions of the parties were altered. It was Cynthia now who raised herself into liveliness, partly from a consciousness that he would have noticed any depression, and partly because, from their cradle to their grave, Cynthia was one of those natural coquettes, who instinctively bring out all their prettiest airs and graces in order to stand well with any man, young or old, who may happen to be present. She listened to his remarks and stories with all the sweet intentness of happier days, till Molly, silent and wondering, could hardly believe that the Cynthia before her was the same girl as she who was sobbing and crying as if her heart would break, but two hours before. It is true she looked pale and heavy-eyed, but that was the only sign she gave of her past trouble, which yet must be a present care, thought Molly. After dinner, Mr. Gibson

went out to his town patients; Mrs. Gibson subsided into her arm-chair, holding a sheet of *The Times* before her, behind which she took a quiet and lady-like doze. Cynthia had a book in one hand, with the other she shaded her eyes from the light. Molly alone could neither read, nor sleep, nor work. She sate in the seat in the bow-window; the blind was not drawn down, for there was no danger of their being overlooked. She gazed into the soft outer darkness, and found herself striving to discern the outlines of objects —the cottage at the end of the garden—the great beech-tree with the seat round it—the wire arches, up which the summer roses had clambered; each came out faint and dim against the dusky velvet of the atmosphere. Presently tea came, and there was the usual nightly bustle. The table was cleared, Mrs. Gibson roused herself, and made the same remark about dear papa that she had done at the same hour for weeks past. Cynthia too did not look different from usual. And yet what a hidden mystery did her calmness hide! thought Molly. At length came bed-time, and the customary little speeches. Both Molly and Cynthia went to their own rooms without exchanging a word. When Molly was in hers she had forgotten whether she was to go to Cynthia, or Cynthia to come to her. She took off her gown and put on her dressing-gown, and stood and waited, and even sat down for a minute or two: but Cynthia did not come, so Molly went and knocked at the opposite door, which, to her surprise, she found shut. When she entered the room Cynthia sate by her dressing-table, just as she came up from the drawing-room. She had been leaning her head on her arms, and seemed almost to have forgotten the tryst she had made with Molly, for she looked up as if startled, and her face did seem full of worry and distress; in her solitude she made no more exertion, but gave way to thoughts of care.

CHAPTER XIV.

CYNTHIA'S CONFESSION.

"You said I might come," said Molly, "and that you would tell me all."

"You know all, I think," said Cynthia, heavily. "Perhaps you don't know what excuses I have, but at any rate you know what a scrape I am in."

"I've been thinking a great deal," said Molly, timidly and doubtfully. "And I can't help fancying if you told papa——"

Before she could go on, Cynthia had stood up.

"No!" said she. "That I won't. Unless I'm to leave here at once. And you know I have not another place to go to—without warning, I mean. I daresay my uncle would take me in, he's a relation, and would be bound to stand by me in whatever disgrace I might be; or perhaps I might get a governess's situation; a pretty governess I should be!"

"Pray, please, Cynthia, don't go off into such wild talking. I don't believe you've done so very wrong. You say you have not, and I believe you. That horrid man has managed to get you involved in some way; but I am sure papa could set it to rights, if you would only make a friend of him, and tell him all——"

"No, Molly," said Cynthia, "I can't, and there's an end of it. You may if you like, only let me leave the house first; give me that much time."

"You know I would never tell anything you wished me not to tell, Cynthia," said Molly, deeply hurt.

"Would you not, darling?" said Cynthia, taking her hand. "Will you promise me that? quite a sacred promise?—for it would be such a comfort to me to tell you all, now you know so much."

"Yes! I'll promise not to tell. You should not have doubted me," said Molly, still a little sorrowfully.

"Very well. I trust to you. I know I may."

"But do think of telling papa, and getting him to help you," persevered Molly.

"Never," said Cynthia, resolutely, but more quietly than before. "Do you think I forget what he said at the time of that wretched Mr. Coxe; how severe he was, and how long I was in disgrace, if indeed I'm out of it now? I am one of those people, as mamma says sometimes—I cannot live with persons who don't think well of me. It may be a weakness, or a sin,—I'm sure I don't know, and I don't care; but I really cannot be happy in the same house with any one who knows my faults, and thinks they are greater than my merits. Now you know your father would do that. I have often told you that he (and you too, Molly,) had a higher standard than I had ever known. Oh, I could not bear it; if he were to know he would be so angry with me—he would never get over it, and I have so liked him! I do so like him!"

"Well, never mind, dear; he shall not know," said Molly, for Cynthia was again becoming hysterical,—"at least, we'll say no more about it now."

"And you'll never say any more—never—promise me," said Cynthia," taking her hand eagerly.

"Never till you give me leave. Now do let me see if I cannot help you. Lie down on the bed, and I'll sit by you, and let us talk it over."

But Cynthia sat down again in the chair by the dressing-table.

"When did it all begin?" said Molly, after a long pause of silence.

Long ago—four or five years. I was such a child to be left all to myself. It was the holidays, and mamma was away visiting, and the Donaldsons asked me to go with them to the Worcester Festival. You can't fancy how pleasant it all sounded, especially to me. I had been shut up in that great dreary house at Ashcombe, where mamma had her school; it belonged to Lord Cumnor, and Mr. Preston as his agent had to see it all painted and papered; but, besides that, he was very intimate with us; I believe mamma thought—no, I'm not sure about that, and I have enough blame to lay at her door, to prevent my telling you anything that may be only fancy——"

Then she paused and sate still for a minute or two, recalling the past. Molly was struck by the aged and careworn expression

which had taken temporary hold of the brilliant and beautiful face; she could see from that how much Cynthia must have suffered from this hidden trouble of hers.

"Well! at any rate we were intimate with him, and he came a great deal about the house, and knew as much as any one of mamma's affairs, and all the ins and outs of her life. I'm telling you that in order that you may understand how natural it was for me to answer his questions, when he came one day and found me, not crying, for you know I'm not much given to that, in spite of to-day's exposure of myself; but fretting and fuming because, though mamma had written word I might go with the Donaldsons, she had never said how I was to get any money for the journey, much less for anything of dress, and I had outgrown all my last year's frocks, and as for gloves and boots—in short, I really had hardly clothes decent enough for church——"

"Why didn't you write to her and tell her all this?" said Molly, half afraid of appearing to cast blame by her very natural question.

"I wish I had her letter to show you; you must have seen some of mamma's letters, though; don't you know how she always seems to leave out just the important point of every fact? In this case she descanted largely on the enjoyment she was having, and the kindness she was receiving, and her wish that I could have been with her, and her gladness that I too was going to have some pleasure; but the only thing that would have been of real use to me she left out, and that was where she was going to next. She mentioned that she was leaving the house she was stopping at the day after she wrote, and that she should be at home by a certain date; but I got the letter on a Saturday, and the festival began the next Tuesday——"

"Poor Cynthia!" said Molly. "Still, if you had written, your letter might have been forwarded. I don't mean to be hard, only I do so dislike the thought of your ever having made a friend of that man."

"Ah!" said Cynthia, sighing. "How easy it is to judge rightly after one sees what evil comes from judging wrongly! I was only a young girl, hardly more than a child, and he was a friend to us then; excepting mamma, the only friend I knew; the Donaldsons were only kind and good-natured acquaintances."

"I am sorry," said Molly, humbly, "I have been so happy with papa. I hardly can understand how different it must have been with you."

"Different! I should think so. The worry about money made me sick of my life. We might not say we were poor, it would have injured the school; but I would have stinted and starved if mamma and I had got on as happily together as we might have done—as you and Mr. Gibson do. It was not the poverty; it was that she never seemed to care to have me with her. As soon as the holidays came round she was off to some great house or another; and I dare-say I was at a very awkward age to have me lounging about in the drawing-room when callers came. Girls at the age I was then are so terribly keen at scenting out motives, and putting in their awkward questions as to the little twistings and twirlings and vanishings of conversation; they've no distinct notion of what are the truths and falsehoods of polite life. At any rate, I was very much in mamma's way, and I felt it. Mr. Preston seemed to feel it too for me; and I was very grateful to him for kind words and sympathetic looks—crumbs of kindness which would have dropped under your table unnoticed. So this day, when he came to see how the workmen were getting on, he found me in the deserted schoolroom, looking at my faded summer bonnet and some old ribbons I had been sponging out, and half-worn-out gloves—a sort of rag-fair spread out on the deal table. I was in a regular passion with only looking at that shabbiness. He said he was so glad to hear I was going to this festival with the Donaldsons; old Sally, our servant, had told him the news, I believe. But I was so perplexed about money, and my vanity was so put out about my shabby dress, that I was in a pet, and said I should not go. He sate down on the table, and little by little he made me tell him all my troubles. I do sometimes think he was very nice in those days. Somehow, I never felt as if it was wrong or foolish or anything to accept his offer of money at the time. He had twenty pounds in his pocket, he said, and really did not know what to do with it,—should not want it for months; I could repay it, or rather mamma could, when it suited her. She must have known I should want money, and most likely thought I should apply to him. Twenty pounds would not be too much, I must take it all, and so on. I knew—at least I thought I knew—that I should never spend twenty pounds; but I thought I could give him back what I did not want,

and so—well, that was the beginning! It doesn't sound so very wrong, does it, Molly?"

"No," said Molly, hesitatingly. She did not wish to make herself into a hard judge, and yet she did so dislike Mr. Preston. Cynthia went on,—

"Well, what with boots and gloves, and a bonnet and a mantle, and a white muslin gown, which was made for me before I left on Tuesday, and a silk gown that followed to the Donaldsons', and my journeys, and all, there was very little left of the twenty pounds, especially when I found I must get a ball-dress in Worcester, for we were all to go to the Ball. Mrs. Donaldson gave me my ticket, but she rather looked grave at my idea of going to the Ball in my white muslin, which I had already worn two evenings at their house. Oh dear! how pleasant it must be to be rich! You know," continued Cynthia, smiling a very little, "I can't help being aware that I'm pretty, and that people admire me very much. I found it out first at the Donaldsons'. I began to think I did look pretty in my fine new clothes, and I saw that other people thought so too. I was certainly the belle of the house, and it was very pleasant to feel my power. The last day or two of that gay week Mr. Preston joined our party. The last time he had seen me was when I was dressed in shabby clothes too small for me, half-crying in my solitude, neglected and penniless. At the Donaldsons' I was a little queen; and as I said, fine feathers make fine birds, and all the people were making much of me; and at that ball, which was the first night he came, I had more partners than I knew what to do with. I suppose he really did fall in love with me then. I don't think he had done so before. And then I began to feel how awkward it was to be in his debt. I could not give myself airs to him as I did to others. Oh! it was so awkward and uncomfortable! But I liked him, and felt him as a friend all the time. The last day I was walking in the garden along with the others, and I thought I could tell him how much I had enjoyed myself, and how happy I had been, all thanks to his twenty pounds (I was beginning to feel like Cinderella when the clock was striking twelve), and to tell him it should be repaid to him as soon as possible, though I turned sick at the thought of telling mamma, and knew enough of our affairs to understand how very difficult it would be to muster up the money. The end of our talk came very soon; for, almost to my terror, he began to talk violent love to me, and to beg me to

promise to marry him. I was so frightened, that I ran away to the others. But that night I got a letter from him, apologizing for startling me, renewing his offer, his entreaties for a promise of marriage, to be fulfilled at any date I would please to name—in fact, a most urgent love-letter, and in it a reference to my unlucky debt, which was to be a debt no longer, only an advance of the money to be hereafter mine if only—— You can fancy it all, Molly, better than I can remember it to tell it you."

"And what did you say?" asked Molly, breathless.

"I did not answer it at all until another letter came, entreating for a reply. By that time mamma had come home, and the old daily pressure and plaint of poverty had come on. Mary Donaldson wrote to me often, singing the praises of Mr. Preston as enthusiastically as if she had been bribed to do it. I had seen him a very popular man in their set, and I liked him well enough, and felt grateful to him. So I wrote and gave him my promise to marry him when I was twenty, but it was to be a secret till then. And I tried to forget I had ever borrowed money of him, but somehow as soon as I felt pledged to him I began to hate him. I couldn't endure his eagerness of greeting if ever he found me alone; and mamma began to suspect, I think. I cannot tell you all the ins and outs; in fact, I didn't understand them at the time, and I don't remember clearly how it all happened now. But I know that Lady Cuxhaven sent mamma some money to be applied to my education, as she called it; and mamma seemed very much put out and in very low spirits, and she and I didn't get on at all together. So, of course, I never ventured to name the hateful twenty pounds to her, but went on trying to think that if I was to marry Mr. Preston, it need never be paid—very mean and wicked, I daresay; but oh, Molly, I've been punished for it, for now I abhor that man."

"But why? When did you begin to dislike him? You seem to have taken it very passively all this time."

"I don't know. It was growing upon me before I went to that school at Boulogne. He made me feel as if I was in his power; and by too often reminding me of my engagement to him, he made me critical of his words and ways. There was an insolence in his manner to mamma, too. Ah! you're thinking that I'm not too respectful a daughter—and perhaps not; but I couldn't bear his covert sneers at her faults, and I hated his way of showing what he called his 'love' for me. Then, after I had been a *semestre* at

Mdme. Lefebre's, a new English girl came—a cousin of his, who knew but little of me. Now, Molly, you must forget as soon as I've told you what I'm going to say; and she used to talk so much and perpetually about her cousin Robert—he was the great man of the family, evidently—and how he was so handsome, and every lady of the land in love with him,—a lady of title into the bargain ——"

"Lady Harriet! I daresay," said Molly, indignantly.

"I don't know," said Cynthia, wearily. "I didn't care at the time, and I don't care now; for she went on to say there was a very pretty widow too, who made desperate love to him. He had often laughed with them at all her little advances, which she thought he didn't see through. And, oh! and this was the man I had promised to marry, and gone into debt to, and written love-letters to! So now you understand it all, Molly."

"No, I don't yet. What did you do on hearing how he had spoken about your mother?"

"There was but one thing to do. I wrote and told him I hated him, and would never, never marry him, and would pay him back his money and the interest on it as soon as ever I could."

"Well?"

"And Mdme. Lefebre brought me back my letter, unopened, I will say; and told me that she didn't allow letters to gentlemen to be sent by the pupils of her establishment unless she had previously seen their contents. I told her he was a family friend, the agent who managed mamma's affairs—I really could not stick at the truth; but she wouldn't let it go; and I had to see her burn it, and to give her my promise I wouldn't write again before she would consent not to tell mamma. So I had to calm down and wait till I came home."

"But you didn't see him then; at least, not for some time?"

"No, but I could write; and I began to try and save up my money to pay him."

"What did he say to your letter?"

"Oh, at first he pretended not to believe I could be in earnest; he thought it was only pique, or a temporary offence to be apologized for and covered over with passionate protestations."

"And afterwards?"

"He condescended to threats; and, what is worse, then I turned coward. I couldn't bear to have it all known and talked about, and my silly letters shown—oh, such letters! I cannot bear to think of them, beginning, 'My dearest Robert,' to that man——"

"But, oh, Cynthia, how could you go and engage yourself to Roger?" asked Molly.

"Why not?" said Cynthia, sharply turning round upon her. "I was free—I am free; it seemed a way of assuring myself that I was quite free; and I did like Roger—it was such a comfort to be brought into contact with people who could be relied upon; and I was not a stock or a stone that I could fail to be touched with his tender, unselfish love, so different to Mr. Preston's. I know you don't think me good enough for him; and, of course, if all this comes out, he won't think me good enough either" (falling into a plaintive tone very touching to hear); "and sometimes I think I'll give him up, and go off to some fresh life amongst strangers; and once or twice I've thought I would marry Mr. Preston out of pure revenge, and have him for ever in my power—only I think I should have the worst of it; for he is cruel in his very soul—tigerish, with his beautiful striped skin and relentless heart. I have so begged and begged him to let me go without exposure."

"Never mind the exposure," said Molly. "It will recoil far more on him than harm you."

Cynthia went a little paler. "But I said things in those letters about mamma. I was quick-eyed enough to all her faults, and hardly understood the force of her temptations; and he says he will show those letters to your father, unless I consent to acknowledge our engagement."

"He shall not!" said Molly, rising up in her indignation, and standing before Cynthia almost as resolutely fierce as if she were in the very presence of Mr. Preston himself. "I am not afraid of him. He dare not insult me, or if he does I do not care. I will ask him for those letters, and see if he will dare to refuse me."

"You don't know him," said Cynthia, shaking her head. "He has made many an appointment with me, just as if he would take back the money—which has been sealed up ready for him this four months; or as if he would give me back my letters. Poor, poor Roger! How little he thinks of all this! When I want to write words of love to him I pull myself up, for I have written words as affectionate to that other man. And if Mr. Preston ever guessed that Roger and I were engaged, he would manage to be revenged on both him and me, by giving us as much pain as he could with those unlucky letters—written when I was not sixteen, Molly,—only seven of them! They are like a mine under my feet,

which may blow up any day; and down will come father and mother and all." She ended bitterly enough, though her words were so light.

"How can I get them?" said Molly, thinking: "for get them I will. With papa to back me, he dare not refuse."

"Ah! But that's just the thing. He knows I'm afraid of your father's hearing of it all, more than of any one else."

"And yet he thinks he loves you!"

"It is his way of loving. He says often enough, he doesn't care what he does so he gets me to be his wife; and that after that he is sure he can make me love him." Cynthia began to cry, out of weariness of body and despair of mind. Molly's arms were round her in a minute, and she pressed the beautiful head to her bosom, and laid her own cheek upon it, and hushed her up with lulling words, just as if she were a little child.

"Oh, it is such a comfort to have told you all!" murmured Cynthia. And Molly made reply,—"I am sure we have right on our side; and that makes me certain he must and shall give up the letters."

"And take the money?" added Cynthia, lifting her head, and looking eagerly into Molly's face. "He must take the money. Oh, Molly, you can never manage it all without its coming out to your father! And I would far rather go out to Russia as a governess. I almost think I would rather—no, not that," said she, shuddering away from what she was going to say. "But he must not know—please, Molly, he must not know. I couldn't bear it. I don't know what I might not do. You'll promise me never to tell him,—or mamma?"

"I never will. You do not think I would for anything short of saving——" She was going to have said, "saving you and Roger from pain." But Cynthia broke in,—

"For nothing. No reason whatever must make you tell your father. If you fail, you fail, and I will love you for ever for trying; but I shall be no worse than before. Better, indeed; for I shall have the comfort of your sympathy. But promise me not to tell Mr. Gibson."

"I have promised once," said Molly, "but I promise again; so now do go to bed, and try and rest. You are looking as white as a sheet; you'll be ill if you don't get some rest; and it's past two o'clock, and you're shivering with cold."

So they wished each other good-night. But when Molly got into her room all her spirit left her; and she threw herself down on her bed, dressed as she was, for she had no heart left for anything. If Roger ever heard of it all by any chance, she felt how it would disturb his love for Cynthia. And yet was it right to conceal it from him? She must try and persuade Cynthia to tell it all straight out to him as soon as he returned to England. A full confession on her part would wonderfully lessen any pain he might have on first hearing of it. She lost herself in thoughts of Roger—how he would feel, what he would say, how that meeting would come to pass, where he was at that very time, and so on, till she suddenly plucked herself up, and recollected what she herself had offered and promised to do. Now that the first furor was over, she saw the difficulties clearly; and the foremost of all was how she was to manage to have an interview with Mr. Preston? How had Cynthia managed? and the letters that had passed between them too? Unwillingly, Molly was compelled to perceive that there must have been a good deal of underhand work going on beneath Cynthia's apparent openness of behaviour; and still more unwillingly she began to be afraid that she herself might be led into the practice. But she would try and walk in a straight path; and if she did wander out of it, it should only be to save pain to those whom she loved.

CHAPTER XV.

MOLLY GIBSON TO THE RESCUE.

It seemed strange enough, after the storms of the night, to meet in smooth tranquillity at breakfast. Cynthia was pale; but she talked as quietly as usual about all manner of different things, while Molly sate silent, watching and wondering, and becoming convinced that Cynthia must have gone through a long experience of concealing her real thoughts and secret troubles before she could have been able to put on such a semblance of composure. Among the letters that came in that morning was one from the London Kirkpatricks; but not from Helen, Cynthia's own particular correspondent. Her sister wrote to apologize for Helen, who was not well, she said: had had the influenza, which had left her very weak and poorly.

"Let her come down here for change of air," said Mr. Gibson. "The country at this time of the year is better than London, except when the place is surrounded by trees. Now our house is well drained, high up, gravel soil, and I'll undertake to doctor her for nothing."

"It would be charming," said Mrs. Gibson, rapidly revolving in her mind the changes necessary in her household economy before receiving a young lady accustomed to such a household as Mr. Kirkpatrick's,—calculating the consequent inconveniences, and weighing them against the probable advantages, even while she spoke.

"Should not you like it, Cynthia? and Molly too? You, too, dear, would become acquainted with one of the girls, and I have no doubt you would be asked back again, which would be so very nice!"

"And I should not let her go," said Mr. Gibson, who had acquired an unfortunate facility of reading his wife's thoughts.

"Dear Helen!" went on Mrs. Gibson, "I should so like to

nurse her! We would make your consulting-room into her own private sitting-room, my dear."—(It is hardly necessary to say that the scales had been weighed down by the inconveniences of having a person behind the scenes for several weeks). "For with an invalid so much depends on tranquillity. In the drawing-room, for instance, she might constantly be disturbed by callers; and the dining-room is so—so what shall I call it? so dinnery,—the smell of meat never seems to leave it; it would have been different if dear papa had allowed me to throw out that window——"

"Why can't she have the dressing-room for her bedroom, and the little room opening out of the drawing-room for her sitting-room?" asked Mr. Gibson.

"The library," for by this name Mrs. Gibson chose to dignify what had formerly been called the book-closet—"why, it would hardly hold a sofa, besides the books and the writing-table; and there are draughts everywhere. No, my dear, we had better not ask her at all, her own home is comfortable at any rate!"

"Well, well!" said Mr. Gibson, seeing that he was to be worsted, and not caring enough about the matter to show fight. "Perhaps you're right. It's a case of luxury *versus* fresh air. Some people suffer more from the want of one than from want of the other. You know I shall be glad to see her if she likes to come, and take us as we are, but I can't give up the consulting-room. It's a necessity and daily bread!"

"I'll write and tell them how kind Mr. Gibson is," said his wife in high contentment, as her husband left the room. "They'll be just as much obliged to him as if she had come!"

Whether it was from Helen's illness, or some other cause, after breakfast Cynthia became very flat and absent, and this lasted all day long. Molly understood now why her moods had been so changeable for many months, and was tender and forbearing with her accordingly. Towards evening, when the two girls were left alone, Cynthia came and stood over Molly, so that her face could not be seen.

"Molly," said she, "will you do it? Will you do what you said last night? I've been thinking of it all day, and sometimes I believe he would give you back the letters if you asked him; he might fancy—at any rate it's worth trying, if you don't very much dislike it."

Now it so happened that, with every thought she had given to

it, Molly disliked the idea of the proposed interview with Mr. Preston more and more ; but it was, after all, her own offer, and she neither could nor would draw back from it; it might do good; she did not see how it could possibly do harm. So she gave her consent, and tried to conceal her distaste, which grew upon her more and more as Cynthia hastily arranged the details,

"You shall meet him in the avenue leading from the park lodge up to the Towers. He can come in one way from the Towers, where he has often business—he has pass-keys everywhere—you can go in as we have often done by the lodge—you need not go far."

It did strike Molly that Cynthia must have had some experience in making all these arrangements ; and she ventured to ask how he was to be informed of all this. Cynthia only reddened and replied, "Oh ! never mind ! He will only be too glad to come ; you heard him say he wished to discuss the affair more ; it is the first time the appointment has come from my side. If I can but once be free—oh, Molly, I will love you, and be grateful to you all my life ! "

Molly thought of Roger, and that thought prompted her next speech.

"It must be horrible—I think I'm very brave—but I don't think I could have—could have accepted even Roger, with a half-cancelled engagement hanging over me." She blushed as she spoke.

"You forget how I detest Mr. Preston ! " said Cynthia. "It was that, more than any excess of love for Roger that made me thankful to be at least as securely pledged to some one else. He did not want to call it an engagement, but I did; because it gave me the feeling of assurance that I was free from Mr. Preston. And so I am ! all but these letters. Oh ! if you can but make him take back his abominable money, and get me my letters ! Then we would bury it all in oblivion, and he could marry somebody else, and I would marry Roger, and no one would be the wiser. After all, it was only what people call 'youthful folly.' And you may tell Mr. Preston that as soon as he makes my letters public, shows them to your father or anything, I'll go away from Hollingford, and never come back."

Loaded with many such messages, which she felt that she would never deliver, not really knowing what she should say, hating the errand, not satisfied with Cynthia's manner of speaking about her relations to Roger, oppressed with shame and complicity in conduct which appeared to her deceitful, yet willing to bear all and brave all,

if she could once set Cynthia in a straight path—in a clear space, and almost more pitiful to her friend's great distress and possible disgrace, than able to give her that love which involves perfect sympathy, Molly set out on her walk towards the appointed place. It was a cloudy, blustering day, and the noise of the blowing wind among the nearly leafless branches of the great trees filled her ears, as she passed through the park-gates and entered the avenue. She walked quickly, instinctively wishing to get her blood up, and have no time for thought. But there was a bend in the avenue about a quarter of a mile from the lodge; after that bend it was a straight line up to the great house, now emptied of its inhabitants. Molly did not like going quite out of sight of the lodge, and she stood facing it, close by the trunk of one of the trees. Presently she heard a step coming on the grass. It was Mr. Preston. He saw a woman's figure, half-behind the trunk of a tree, and made no doubt that it was Cynthia. But when he came nearer, almost close, the figure turned round, and, instead of the brilliantly coloured face of Cynthia, he met the pale resolved look of Molly. She did not speak to greet him; but though he felt sure from the general aspect of pallor and timidity that she was afraid of him, her steady gray eyes met his with courageous innocence.

"Is Cynthia unable to come?" asked he, perceiving that she expected him.

"I did not know you thought that you should meet her," said Molly, a little surprised. In her simplicity she had believed that Cynthia had named that it was she, Molly Gibson, who would meet Mr. Preston at a given time and place; but Cynthia had been too worldly-wise for that, and had decoyed him thither by a vaguely worded note, which, while avoiding actual falsehood, led him to believe that she herself would give him the meeting.

"She said she should be here," said Mr. Preston, extremely annoyed at being entrapped, as he now felt he had been, into an interview with Miss Gibson. Molly hesitated a little before she spoke. He was determined not to break the silence; as she had intruded herself into the affair, she should find her situation as awkward as possible.

"At any rate she sent me here to meet you," said Molly. "She has told me exactly how matters stand between you and her."

"Has she?" sneered he. "She is not always the most open or reliable person in the world!"

Molly reddened. She perceived the impertinence of the tone; and her temper was none of the coolest. But she mastered herself and gained courage by so doing.

"You should not speak so of the person you profess to wish to have for your wife. But putting all that aside, you have some letters of hers that she wishes to have back again."

"I daresay."

"And that you have no right to keep."

"No legal, or no moral right? which do you mean?"

"I do not know; simply you have no right at all, as a gentleman, to keep a girl's letters when she asks for them back again, much less to hold them over her as a threat."

"I see you do know all, Miss Gibson," said he, changing his manner to one of more respect. "At least she has told you her story from her point of view, her side; now you must hear mine. She promised me as solemnly as ever woman——"

"She was not a woman, she was only a girl, barely sixteen."

"Old enough to know what she was doing; but I'll call her a girl if you like. She promised me solemnly to be my wife, making the one stipulation of secrecy, and a certain period of waiting; she wrote me letters repeating this promise, and confidential enough to prove that she considered herself bound to me by such an implied relation. I don't give in to humbug—I don't set myself up as a saint—and in most ways I can look after my own interests pretty keenly; you know enough of her position as a penniless girl, and at that time with no influential connections to take the place of wealth, and help me on in the world. It was as sincere and unworldly a passion as ever man felt; she must say so herself. I might have married two or three girls with plenty of money; one of them was handsome enough, and not at all reluctant."

Molly interrupted him: she was chafed at the conceit of his manner. "I beg your pardon, but I do not want to hear accounts of young ladies whom you might have married; I come here simply on behalf of Cynthia, who does not like you, and who does not wish to marry you."

"Well, then, I must make her 'like' me, as you call it. She did 'like' me once, and made promises which she will find it requires the consent of two people to break. I don't despair of making her love me as much as ever she did, according to her letters, at least, when we are married."

"She will never marry you," said Molly, firmly.

"Then if she ever honours any one else with her preference, he shall be allowed the perusal of her letters to me."

Molly almost could have laughed, she was so secure and certain that Roger would never read letters offered to him under these circumstances; but then she thought that he would feel such pain at the whole affair, and at the contact with Mr. Preston, especially if he had not heard of it from Cynthia first, and if she, Molly, could save him pain she would. Before she could settle what to say, Mr. Preston spoke again.

"You said the other day that Cynthia was engaged. May I ask whom to?"

"No," said Molly, "you may not. You heard her say it was not an engagement. It is not exactly; and if it were a full engagement, do you think, after what you last said, I should tell you to whom? But you may be sure of this, he would never read a line of your letters. He is too—— No! I won't speak of him before you. You could never understand him."

"It seems to me that this mysterious 'he' is a very fortunate person to have such a warm defender in Miss Gibson, to whom he is not at all engaged," said Mr. Preston, with so disagreeable a look on his face that Molly suddenly found herself on the point of bursting into tears. But she rallied herself, and worked on—for Cynthia first, and for Roger as well.

"No honourable man or woman will read your letters, and if any people do read them, they will be so much ashamed of it that they won't dare to speak of them. What use can they be of to you?"

"They contain Cynthia's reiterated promises of marriage," replied he.

"She says she would rather leave Hollingford for ever, and go out to earn her bread, than marry you."

His face fell a little. He looked so bitterly mortified, that Molly was almost sorry for him.

"Does she say that to you in cold blood? Do you know you are telling me very hard truths, Miss Gibson? If they are truths, that is to say," he continued, recovering himself a little. "Young ladies are very fond of the words 'hate' and 'detest.' I've known many who have applied them to men whom they were all the time hoping to marry."

"I cannot tell about other people," said Molly; "I only know that Cynthia does—" Here she hesitated for a moment; she felt for his pain, and so she hesitated; but then she brought it out —"does as nearly hate you as anybody like her ever does hate."

"Like her?" said he, repeating the words almost unconsciously, seizing on anything to try and hide his mortification.

"I mean, I should hate worse," said Molly in a low voice.

But he did not attend much to her answer. He was working the point of his stick into the turf, and his eyes were bent on it.

"So now would you mind sending her back the letters by me? I do assure you that you cannot make her marry you."

"You are very simple, Miss Gibson," said he, suddenly lifting up his head. "I suppose you don't know that there is any other feeling that can be gratified, excepting love. Have you never heard of revenge? Cynthia has cajoled me with promises, and little as you or she may believe me—well, it's no use speaking of that. I don't mean to let her go unpunished. You may tell her that. I shall keep the letters, and make use of them as I see fit when the occasion arises."

Molly was miserably angry with herself for her mismanagement of the affair. She had hoped to succeed: she had only made matters worse. What new argument could she use? Meanwhile he went on, lashing himself up as he thought how the two girls must have talked him over, bringing in wounded vanity to add to the rage of disappointed love.

"Mr. Osborne Hamley may hear of their contents, though he may be too honourable to read them. Nay, even your father may hear whispers; and if I remember them rightly, Miss Cynthia Kirkpatrick does not always speak in the most respectful terms of the lady who is now Mrs. Gibson. There are——"

"Stop," said Molly. "I won't hear anything out of these letters, written, when she was almost without friends, to you, whom she looked upon as a friend! But I have thought of what I will do next. I give you fair warning. If I had not been foolish, I should have told my father, but Cynthia made me promise that I would not. So I will tell it all, from beginning to end, to Lady Harriet, and ask her to speak to her father. I feel sure that she will do it; and I don't think you will dare to refuse Lord Cumnor."

He felt at once that he should not dare; that, clever land-agent

as he was, and high up in the earl's favour on that account, yet that the conduct of which he had been guilty in regard to the letters, and the threats which he had held out respecting them, were just what no gentleman, no honourable man, no manly man, could put up with in any one about him. He knew that much, and he wondered how she, the girl standing before him, had been clever enough to find it out. He forgot himself for an instant in admiration of her. There she stood, frightened, yet brave, not letting go her hold on what she meant to do, even when things seemed most against her; and besides, there was something that struck him most of all perhaps, and which shows the kind of man he was—he perceived that Molly was as unconscious that he was a young man, and she a young woman, as if she had been a pure angel of heaven. Though he felt that he would have to yield, and give up the letters, he was not going to do it at once; and while he was thinking what to say, so as still to evade making any concession till he had had time to think over it, he, with his quick senses all about him, heard the trotting of a horse cranching quickly along over the gravel of the drive. A moment afterwards, Molly's perception overtook his. He could see the startled look overspread her face; and in an instant she would have run away, but before the first rush was made, Mr. Preston laid his hand firmly on her arm.

"Keep quiet. You must be seen. You, at any rate, have done nothing to be ashamed of."

As he spoke, Mr. Sheepshanks came round the bend of the road and was close upon them. Mr. Preston saw, if Molly did not, the sudden look of intelligence that dawned upon the shrewd ruddy face of the old gentleman—saw, but did not much heed. He went forwards and spoke to Mr. Sheepshanks, who made a halt right before them.

"Miss Gibson! your servant. Rather a blustering day for a young lady to be out,—and cold, I should say, for standing still too long; eh, Preston?" poking his whip at the latter in a knowing manner.

"Yes," said Mr. Preston; "and I'm afraid I've kept Miss Gibson too long standing."

Molly did not know what to say or do; so she only bowed a silent farewell, and turned away to go home, feeling very heavy at heart at the non-success of her undertaking. For she did not know how she had conquered, in fact, although Mr. Preston might

not as yet acknowledge it even to himself. Before she was out of hearing, she heard Mr. Sheepshanks say,—

"Sorry to have disturbed your tête-à-tête, Preston," but though she heard the words, their implied sense did not sink into her mind; she was only feeling how she had gone out glorious and confident, and was coming back to Cynthia defeated.

Cynthia was on the watch for her return, and, rushing downstairs, dragged Molly into the dining-room.

"Well, Molly? Oh! I see you haven't got them. After all, I never expected it." She sate down, as if she could get over her disappointment better in that position, and Molly stood like a guilty person before her.

"I am so sorry; I did all I could; we were interrupted at last —Mr. Sheepshanks rode up."

"Provoking old man! Do you think you should have persuaded him to give up the letters if you had had more time?"

"I don't know. I wish Mr. Sheepshanks hadn't come up just then. I didn't like his finding me standing talking to Mr. Preston."

"Oh! I daresay he'd never think anything about it. What did he—Mr. Preston—say?"

"He seemed to think you were fully engaged to him, and that these letters were the only proof he had. I think he loves you in his way."

"His way, indeed!" said Cynthia, scornfully.

"The more I think of it, the more I see it would be better for papa to speak to him. I did say I would tell it all to Lady Harriet, and get Lord Cumnor to make him give up the letters. But it would be very awkward."

"Very!" said Cynthia, gloomily. "But he would see it was only a threat."

"But I will do it in a moment, if you like. I meant what I said; only I feel that papa would manage it best of all, and more privately."

"I'll tell you what, Molly, you're bound by a promise, you know, and cannot tell Mr. Gibson without breaking your solemn word, but it's just this: I'll leave Hollingford and never come back again, if ever your father hears of this affair; there!" Cynthia stood up now, and began to fold up Molly's shawl, in her nervous excitement.

"Oh, Cynthia—Roger!" was all that Molly said.

"Yes, I know! you need not remind me of him. But I'm not going to live in the house with any one who may be always casting up in his mind the things he had heard against me—things—faults, perhaps—which sound so much worse than they really are. I was so happy when I first came here; you all liked me, and admired me, and thought well of me, and now—— Why, Molly, I can see the difference in you already. You carry your thoughts in your face—I have read them there these two days—you've been thinking, 'How Cynthia must have deceived me; keeping up a correspondence all this time—having half-engagements to two men.' You've been more full of that, than of pity for me as a girl who has always been obliged to manage for herself, without any friend to help her and protect her."

Molly was silent. There was a great deal of truth in what Cynthia was saying: and yet a great deal of falsehood. For, through all this long forty-eight hours, Molly had loved Cynthia dearly; and had been more weighed down by the position the latter was in than Cynthia herself. She also knew—but this was a second thought following on the other—that she had suffered much pain in trying to do her best in this interview with Mr. Preston. She had been tried beyond her strength: and the great tears welled up into her eyes, and fell slowly down her cheeks.

"Oh! what a brute I am!" said Cynthia, kissing them away. "I see—I know it is the truth, and I deserve it—but I need not reproach you."

"You did not reproach me!" said Molly, trying to smile. "I have thought something of what you said—but I do love you dearly—dearly, Cynthia—I should have done just the same as you did."

"No, you would not. Your grain is different, somehow."

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFIDENCES.

All the rest of that day Molly was depressed and not well. Having anything to conceal was so unusual—almost so unprecedented a circumstance with her that it preyed upon her in every way.

It was a nightmare that she could not shake off; she did so wish to forget it all, and yet every little occurrence seemed to remind her of it. The next morning's post brought several letters; one from Roger for Cynthia, and Molly, letterless herself, looked at Cynthia as she read it, with wistful sadness. It appeared to Molly as though Cynthia should have no satisfaction in these letters, until she had told him what was her exact position with Mr. Preston; yet Cynthia was colouring and dimpling up as she always did at any pretty words of praise, or admiration, or love. But Molly's thoughts and Cynthia's reading were both interrupted by a little triumphant sound from Mrs. Gibson, as she pushed a letter she had just received to her husband, with a—

"There! I must say I expected that!" Then, turning to Cynthia, she explained—"It is a letter from uncle Kirkpatrick, love. So kind, wishing you to go and stay with them, and help them to cheer up Helen; poor Helen! I am afraid she is very far from well. But we could not have had her here, without disturbing dear papa in his consulting-room; and, though I could have relinquished my dressing-room—he—well! so I said in my letter how you were grieved—you above all of us, because you are such a friend of Helen's, you know—and how you longed to be of use,—as I am sure you do—and so now they want you to go up directly, for Helen has quite set her heart upon it."

Cynthia's eyes sparkled. "I shall like going," said she—"all but leaving you, Molly," she added, in a lower tone, as if suddenly smitten with some compunction.

"Can you be ready to go by the Bang-up to-night?" said Mr. Gibson; "for, curiously enough, after more than twenty years of quiet practice at Hollingford, I am summoned up to-day for the first time to a consultation in London to-morrow. I'm afraid Lady Cumnor is worse, my dear."

"You don't say so? Poor dear lady! What a shock it is to me! I'm so glad I've had some breakfast. I could not have eaten anything."

"Nay, I only say she is worse. With her complaint, being worse may be only a preliminary to being better. Don't take my words for more than their literal meaning."

"Thank you. How kind and reassuring dear papa always is! About your gowns, Cynthia?"

"Oh, they're all right, mamma, thank you. I shall be quite ready by four o'clock. Molly, will you come with me and help me to pack? I wanted to speak to you, dear," said she, as soon as they had gone upstairs. "It is such a relief to get away from a place haunted by that man; but I'm afraid you thought I was glad to leave you; and indeed I am not." There was a little flavour of "protesting too much" about this; but Molly did not perceive it. She only said, "Indeed I did not. I know from my own feelings how you must dislike meeting a man in public in a different manner from what you have done in private. I shall try not to see Mr. Preston again for a long, long time, I'm sure. But, Cynthia, you haven't told me one word out of Roger's letter. Please, how is he? Has he quite got over his attack of fever?"

"Yes, quite. He writes in very good spirits. A great deal about birds and beasts, as usual, habits of natives, and things of that kind. You may read from there" (indicating a place in the letter) "to there, if you can. And I'll tell you what, I'll trust you with it, Molly, while I pack; and that shows my sense of your honour—not but what you might read it all, only you'd find the love-making dull; but make a little account of where he is, and what he is doing, date, and that sort of thing, and send it to his father."

Molly took the letter down without a word, and began to copy it at the writing-table; often reading over what she was allowed to read; often pausing, her cheek on her hand, her eyes on the letter, and letting her imagination rove to the writer, and all the scenes in which she had either seen him herself, or in which her

fancy had painted him. She was startled from her meditations by Cynthia's sudden entrance into the drawing-room, looking the picture of glowing delight. "No one here? What a blessing! Ah, Miss Molly, you're more eloquent than you believe yourself. Look here!" holding up a large full envelope, and then quickly replacing it in her pocket, as if she was afraid of being seen. "What's the matter, sweet one?" coming up and caressing Molly. "Is it worrying itself over that letter? Why, don't you see these are my very own horrible letters, that I am going to burn directly, that Mr. Preston has had the grace to send me, thanks to you, little Molly—cuishla ma chree, pulse of my heart,—the letters that have been hanging over my head like somebody's sword for these two years?"

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Molly, rousing up a little. "I never thought he would have sent them. He's better than I believed him. And now it is all over. I am so glad! You quite think he means to give up all claim over you by this, don't you, Cynthia?"

"He may claim, but I won't be claimed; and he has no proofs now. It is the most charming relief; and I owe it all to you, you precious little lady! Now there's only one thing more to be done; and if you would but do it for me——" (coaxing and caressing while she asked the question).

"Oh, Cynthia, don't ask me; I cannot do any more. You don't know how sick I go when I think of yesterday, and Mr. Sheepshanks' look."

"It is only a very little thing. I won't burden your conscience with telling you how I got my letters, but it is not through a person I can trust with money; and I must force him to take back his twenty-three pounds odd shillings. I have put it together at the rate of five per cent., and it's sealed up. Oh, Molly, I should go off with such a light heart if you would only try to get it safely to him. It's the last thing; there would be no immediate hurry, you know. You might meet him by chance in a shop, in the street, even at a party—and if you only had it with you in your pocket, there would be nothing so easy."

Molly was silent. "Papa would give it to him. There would be no harm in that. I would tell him he must ask no questions as to what it was."

"Very well," said Cynthia, "have it your own way. I think my way is the best: for if any of this affair comes out—— But

you've done a great deal for me already, and I won't blame you now for declining to do any more!"

"I do so dislike having these underhand dealings with him," pleaded Molly.

"Underhand! just simply giving him a letter from me! If I left a note for Miss Browning, should you dislike giving it to her?"

"You know that's very different. I could do it openly."

"And yet there might be writing in that; and there would not be a line with the money. It would only be the winding-up—the honourable, honest winding-up of an affair which has worried me for years. But do as you like!"

"Give it me!" said Molly. "I will try."

"There's a darling! You can but try; and if you can't give it to him in private, without getting yourself into a scrape, why, keep it till I come back again. He shall have it then, whether he will or no!"

Molly looked forward to her tête-à-tête two days with Mrs. Gibson with very different anticipations from those with which she had welcomed the similar intercourse with her father. In the first place, there was no accompanying the travellers to the inn from which the coach started; leave-taking in the market-place was quite out of the bounds of Mrs. Gibson's sense of propriety. Besides this, it was a gloomy, rainy evening, and candles had to be brought in at an unusually early hour. There would be no break for six hours—no music, no reading; but the two ladies would sit at their worsted work, pattering away at small-talk, with not even the usual break of dinner; for, to suit the requirements of those who were leaving, they had already dined early. But Mrs. Gibson really meant to make Molly happy, and tried to be an agreeable companion, only Molly was not well, and was uneasy about many apprehended cares and troubles—and at such hours of indisposition as she was then passing through, apprehensions take the shape of certainties, lying await in our paths. Molly would have given a good deal to have shaken off all these feelings, unusual enough to her; but the very house and furniture, and rain-blurred outer landscape, seemed steeped with unpleasant associations, most of them dating from the last few days.

"You and I must go on the next journey, I think, my dear," said Mrs. Gibson, almost chiming in with Molly's wish that she could get away from Hollingford into some new air and life, for a

week or two. We have been stay-at-homes for a long time, and variety of scene is so desirable for the young! But I think the travellers will be wishing themselves at home by this nice bright fireside. 'There's no place like home,' as the poet says. 'Mid pleasures and palaces although I may roam,' it begins, and it's both very pretty and very true. It's a great blessing to have such a dear little home as this, is not it, Molly?"

"Yes," said Molly, rather drearily, having something of the "Toujours perdrix" feeling at the moment. If she could but have gone away with her father, just for two days, how pleasant it would have been.

"To be sure, love, it would be very nice for you and me to go a little journey all by ourselves. You and I. No one else. If it were not such miserable weather we would have gone off on a little impromptu tour. I've been longing for something of the kind for some weeks; but we live such a restricted kind of life here! I declare sometimes I get quite sick of the very sight of the chairs and tables that I know so well. And one misses the others too! It seems so flat and deserted without them!"

"Yes! We are very forlorn to-night; but I think it's partly owing to the weather!"

"Nonsense, dear. I can't have you giving in to the silly fancy of being affected by weather. Poor dear Mr. Kirkpatrick used to say, 'a cheerful heart makes its own sunshine.' He would say it to me, in his pretty way, whenever I was a little low—for I am a complete barometer—you may really judge of the state of the weather by my spirits, I have always been such a sensitive creature! It is well for Cynthia that she does not inherit it; I don't think her easily affected in any way, do you?"

Molly thought for a minute or two, and then replied—"No, she is certainly not easily affected—not deeply affected perhaps I should say."

"Many girls, for instance, would have been touched by the admiration she excited—I may say the attentions she received when she was at her uncle's last summer."

"At Mr. Kirkpatrick's?"

"Yes. There was Mr. Henderson, that young lawyer; that's to say, he is studying law, but he has a good private fortune and is likely to have more, so he can only be what I call playing at law. Mr. Henderson was over head and ears in love with her. It is not

my fancy, although I grant mothers are partial: both Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick noticed it; and in one of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's letters, she said that poor Mr. Henderson was going into Switzerland for the long vacation, doubtless to try and forget Cynthia; but she really believed he would find it only 'dragging at each remove a lengthening chain.' I thought it such a refined quotation, and altogether worded so prettily. You must know aunt Kirkpatrick some day, Molly, my love; she is what I call a woman of a truly elegant mind."

"I can't help thinking it was a pity that Cynthia did not tell them of her engagement."

"It is not an engagement, my dear! How often must I tell you that?"

"But what am I to call it?"

"I don't see why you need to call it anything. Indeed, I don't understand what you mean by 'it.' You should always try to express yourself intelligibly. It really is one of the first principles of the English language. In fact, philosophers might ask what is language given us for at all, if it is not that we may make our meaning understood?"

"But there is something between Cynthia and Roger; they are more to each other than I am to Osborne, for instance. What am I to call it?"

"You should not couple your name with that of any unmarried young man; it is so difficult to teach you delicacy, child. Perhaps one may say there is a peculiar relation between dear Cynthia and Roger, but it is very difficult to characterize it; I have no doubt that is the reason she shrinks from speaking about it. For, between ourselves, Molly, I really sometimes think it will come to nothing. He is so long away, and, privately speaking, Cynthia is not very very constant. I once knew her very much taken before—that little affair is quite gone by; and she was very civil to Mr. Henderson, in her way; I fancy she inherits it, for when I was a girl I was beset by lovers, and could never find in my heart to shake them off. You have not heard dear papa say anything of the old squire, or dear Osborne, have you? It seems so long since we have heard or seen anything of Osborne. But he must be quite well, I think, or we should have heard of it."

"I believe he is quite well. Some one said the other day that they had met him riding—it was Mrs. Goodenough, now I remember—and that he was looking stronger than he had done for years."

"Indeed! I am truly glad to hear it. I always was fond of Osborne; and, do you know, I never really took to Roger; I respected him and all that, of course. But to compare him with Mr. Henderson! Mr. Henderson is so handsome and well-bred, and gets all his gloves from Houbigant!"

It was true that they had not seen anything of Osborne Hamley for a long time; but, as it often happens, just after they had been speaking about him he appeared. It was on the day following Mr. Gibson's departure that Mrs. Gibson had received one of the notes, not so common now as formerly, from the family in town asking her to go over to the Towers, and find a book, or a manuscript, or something or other that Lady Cumnor wanted with all an invalid's impatience. It was just the kind of employment she required for an amusement on a gloomy day, and it put her into a good humour immediately. There was a certain confidential importance about it, and it was a variety, and it gave her the pleasant drive in a fly up the noble avenue, and the sense of being the temporary mistress of all the grand rooms once so familiar to her. She asked Molly to accompany her, out of an access of kindness, but was not at all sorry when Molly excused herself and preferred stopping at home. At eleven o'clock Mrs. Gibson was off, all in her Sunday best (to use the servant's expression, which she herself would so have contemned), well-dressed in order to impose on the servants at the Towers, for there was no one else to be seen or to be seen by.

"I shall not be at home until the afternoon, my dear! But I hope you will not find it dull. I don't think you will, for you are something like me, my love—never less alone than when alone, as one of the great authors has justly expressed it."

Molly enjoyed the house to herself to the full as much as Mrs. Gibson would enjoy having the Towers to herself. She ventured on having her lunch brought upon a tray into the drawing-room, so that she might eat her sandwiches while she went on with her book. In the middle, Mr. Osborne Hamley was announced. He came in, looking wretchedly ill in spite of purblind Mrs. Goodenough's report of his healthy appearance.

"This call is not on you, Molly," said he, after the first greetings were over. "I was in hopes I might have found your father at home; I thought lunch-time was the best hour." He had sate down, as if thoroughly glad of the rest, and fallen into a languid stooping position, as if it had become so natural to him that no sense

of what were considered good manners sufficed to restrain him now.

"I hope you did not want to see him professionally?" said Molly, wondering if she was wise in alluding to his health, yet urged to it by her real anxiety.

"Yes, I did. I suppose I may help myself to a biscuit and a glass of wine? No, don't ring for more. I could not eat it if it was here. But I just want a mouthful; this is quite enough, thank you. When will your father be back?"

"He was summoned up to London. Lady Cumnor is worse. I fancy there is some operation going on; but I don't know. He will be back to-morrow night."

"Very well. Then I must wait. Perhaps I shall be better by that time. I think it's half fancy; but I should like your father to tell me so. He will laugh at me, I daresay; but I don't think I shall mind that. He always is severe on fanciful patients, isn't he, Molly?"

Molly thought that if he saw Osborne's looks just then he would hardly think him fanciful, or be inclined to be severe. But she only said,—"Papa enjoys a joke at everything, you know. It is a relief after all the sorrow he sees."

"Very true. There is a great deal of sorrow in the world. I don't think it's a very happy place after all. So Cynthia is gone to London?" he added, after a pause. "I think I should like to have seen her again. Poor old Roger! He loves her very dearly, Molly," he said. Molly hardly knew how to answer him in all this; she was so struck by the change in both voice and manner.

"Mamma has gone to the Towers," she began, at length. "Lady Cumnor wanted several things that mamma only can find. She will be sorry to miss you. We were speaking of you only yesterday, and she said how long it was since we had seen you."

"I think I've grown careless; I've often felt so weary and ill that it was all I could do to keep up a brave face before my father."

"Why did you not come and see papa?" said Molly; "or write to him?"

"I cannot tell. I drifted on sometimes better, and sometimes worse, till to-day I mustered up pluck, and came to hear what your father has got to tell me: and all for no use it seems."

"I am very sorry. But it is only for two days. He shall go and see you as soon as ever he returns."

"He must not alarm my father, remember, Molly," said Osborne, lifting himself by the arms of his chair into an upright position and speaking eagerly for the moment. "I wish to God Roger was at home!" said he, falling back into the old posture.

"I can't help understanding you," said Molly. "You think yourself very ill; but isn't it that you are tired just now?" She was not sure if she ought to have understood what was passing in his mind; but as she did, she could not help speaking a true reply.

"Well, sometimes I do think I'm very ill; and then, again, I think it's only the moping life sets me fancying and exaggerating." He was silent for some time. Then, as if he had taken a sudden resolution, he spoke again. "You see, there are others depending upon me—upon my health. You haven't forgotten what you heard that day in the library at home? No, I know you haven't. I have seen the thought of it in your eyes often since then. I didn't know you at that time. I think I do now."

"Don't go on talking so fast," said Molly. "Rest. No one will interrupt us; I will go on with my sewing; when you want to say anything more I shall be listening." For she was alarmed at the strange pallor that had come over his face.

"Thank you." After a time he roused himself, and began to speak very quietly, as if on an indifferent matter of fact.

"The name of my wife is Aimée. Aimée Hamley, of course. She lives at Bishopfield, a village near Winchester. Write it down, but keep it to yourself. She is a Frenchwoman, a Roman Catholic, and was a servant. She is a thoroughly good woman. I must not say how dear she is to me. I dare not. I meant once to have told Cynthia, but she didn't seem quite to consider me as a brother. Perhaps she was shy of a new relation; but you'll give my love to her, all the same. It is a relief to think that some one else has my secret; and you are like one of us, Molly. I can trust you almost as I can trust Roger. I feel better already, now I feel that some one else knows the whereabouts of my wife and child."

"Child!" said Molly, surprised. But before he could reply, Maria had announced,

"Miss Phœbe Browning."

"Fold up that paper," said he, quickly, putting something into her hands. "It is only for yourself."

CHAPTER XVII.

HOLLINGFORD GOSSIPS.

"My dear Molly, why didn't you come and dine with us? I said to sister I would come and scold you well. Oh, Mr. Osborne Hamley, is that you?" and a look of mistaken intelligence at the tête-à-tête she had disturbed came so perceptibly over Miss Phœbe's face that Molly caught Osborne's sympathetic eye, and both smiled at the notion.

"I'm sure I—well! one must sometimes—I see our dinner would have been—" Then she recovered herself into a connected sentence. "We only just heard of Mrs. Gibson's having a fly from the 'George,' because sister sent our Betty to pay for a couple of rabbits Tom Ostler had snared, (I hope we shan't be taken up for poachers, Mr. Osborne—snaring doesn't require a licence, I believe?) and she heard he was gone off with the fly to the Towers with your dear mamma; for Coxe who drives the fly in general has sprained his ankle. We had just finished dinner, but when Betty said Tom Ostler would not be back till night, I said, 'Why, there's that poor dear girl left all alone by herself, and her mother such a friend of ours,'—when she was alive, I mean. But I'm sure I'm glad I'm mistaken."

Osborne said,—"I came to speak to Mr. Gibson, not knowing he had gone to London, and Miss Gibson kindly gave me some of her lunch. I must go now."

"Oh dear! I am so sorry," fluttered out Miss Phœbe, "I disturbed you; but it was with the best intentions. I always was mal-àpropos from a child. But Osborne was gone before she had finished her apologies. Before he left, his eyes met Molly's with a strange look of yearning farewell that struck her at the time, and that she remembered strongly afterwards. "Such a nice suitable

thing, and I came in the midst, and spoilt it all. I am sure you're very kind, my dear, considering—"

"Considering what, my dear Miss Phœbe? If you are conjecturing a love affair between Mr. Osborne Hamley and me, you never were more mistaken in your life. I think I told you so once before. Please do believe me."

"Oh, yes! I remember. And somehow sister got it into her head it was Mr. Preston. I recollect."

"One guess is just as wrong as the other," said Molly, smiling, and trying to look perfectly indifferent, but going extremely red at the mention of Mr. Preston's name. It was very difficult for her to keep up any conversation, for her heart was full of Osborne—his changed appearance, his melancholy words of foreboding, and his confidences about his wife—French, Catholic, servant. Molly could not help trying to piece these strange facts together by imaginations of her own, and found it very hard work to attend to kind Miss Phœbe's unceasing patter. She came up to the point, however, when the voice ceased; and could recall, in a mechanical manner, the echo of the last words, which from both Miss Phœbe's look, and the dying accent that lingered in Molly's ear, she perceived to be a question. Miss Phœbe was asking her if she would go out with her. She was going to Grinstead's, the bookseller of Hollingford; who, in addition to his regular business, was the agent for the Hollingford Book Society, received their subscriptions, kept their accounts, ordered their books from London, and, on payment of a small salary, allowed the Society to keep their volumes on shelves in his shop. It was the centre of news, and the club, as it were, of the little town. Everybody who pretended to gentility in the place belonged to it. It was a test of gentility, indeed, rather than of education or a love of literature. No shopkeeper would have thought of offering himself as a member, however great his general intelligence and love of reading; while it boasted on its list of subscribers most of the county families in the neighbourhood, some of whom subscribed to it as a sort of duty belonging to their station, without often using their privilege of reading the books: while there were residents in the little town, such as Mrs. Goodenough, who privately thought reading a great waste of time, that might be much better employed in sewing, and knitting, and pastry-making, but who nevertheless belonged to it as a mark of station, just as these good, motherly women would have thought it a terrible come-

down in the world if they had not had a pretty young servant-maid to fetch them home from the tea-parties at night. At any rate, Grinstead's was a very convenient place for a lounge. In that view of the Book Society every one agreed.

Molly went upstairs to get ready to accompany Miss Phœbe; and on opening one of her drawers she saw Cynthia's envelope, containing the money she owed to Mr. Preston, carefully sealed up like a letter. This was what Molly had so unwillingly promised to deliver—the last final stroke to the affair. Molly took it up, hating it. For a time she had forgotten it; and now it was here, facing her, and she must try and get rid of it. She put it into her pocket for the chances of the walk and the day, and fortune for once seemed to befriend her; for, on their entering Grinstead's shop, in which two or three people were now, as always, congregated, making play of examining the books, or business of writing down the titles of new works in the order-book, there was Mr. Preston. He bowed as they came in. He could not help that; but, at the sight of Molly, he looked as ill-tempered and out of humour as a man well could do. She was connected in his mind with defeat and mortification; and besides, the sight of her called up what he desired now, above all things, to forget; namely, the deep conviction, received through Molly's simple earnestness, of Cynthia's dislike to him. If Miss Phœbe had seen the scowl upon his handsome face, she might have undeceived her sister in her suppositions about him and Molly. But Miss Phœbe, who did not consider it quite maidenly to go and stand close to Mr. Preston, and survey the shelves of books in such close proximity to a gentleman, found herself an errand at the other end of the shop, and occupied herself in buying writing-paper. Molly fingered her valuable letter, as it lay in her pocket; did she dare to cross over to Mr. Preston, and give it to him, or not? While she was still undecided, shrinking always just at the moment when she thought she had got her courage up for action, Miss Phœbe, having finished her purchase, turned round, and after looking a little pathetically at Mr. Preston's back, said to Molly in a whisper—"I think we'll go to Johnson's now, and come back for the books in a little while." So across the street to Johnson's they went; but no sooner had they entered the draper's shop, than Molly's conscience smote her for her cowardice, and loss of a good opportunity. "I'll be back directly," said she, as soon as Miss Phœbe was engaged with her purchases; and Molly

ran across to Grinstead's, without looking either to the right or the left; she had been watching the door, and she knew that no Mr. Preston had issued forth. She ran in; he was at the counter now, talking to Grinstead himself; Molly put the letter into his hand, to his surprise, and almost against his will, and turned round to go back to Miss Phœbe. At the door of the shop stood Mrs. Goodenough, arrested in the act of entering, staring, with her round eyes, made still rounder and more owl-like by spectacles, to see Molly Gibson giving Mr. Preston a letter, which he, conscious of being watched, and favouring underhand practices habitually, put quickly into his pocket, unopened. Perhaps, if he had had time for reflection he would not have scrupled to put Molly to open shame, by rejecting what she so eagerly forced upon him.

There was another long evening to be got through with Mrs. Gibson; but on this occasion there was the pleasant occupation of dinner, which took up at least an hour; for it was one of Mrs. Gibson's fancies—one which Molly chafed against—to have every ceremonial gone through in the same stately manner for two as for twenty. So, although Molly knew full well, and her stepmother knew full well, and Maria knew full well, that neither Mrs. Gibson nor Molly touched dessert, it was set on the table with as much form as if Cynthia had been at home, who delighted in almonds and raisins; or Mr. Gibson been there, who never could resist dates, though he always protested against "persons in their station of life having a formal dessert set out before them every day."

And Mrs. Gibson herself apologized, as it were, to Molly to-day, in the same words she had often used to Mr. Gibson,—"It's no extravagance, for we need not eat it—I never do. But it looks well, and makes Maria understand what is required in the daily life of every family of position."

All through the evening Molly's thoughts wandered far and wide, though she managed to keep up a show of attention to what Mrs. Gibson was saying. She was thinking of Osborne, and his abrupt, half-finished confidence, and his ill-looks; she was wondering when Roger would come home, and longing for his return, as much (she said to herself) for Osborne's sake as for her own. And then she checked herself. What had she to do with Roger? Why should she long for his return? It was Cynthia who was doing this; only somehow he was such a true friend to Molly, that she

could not help thinking of him as a staff and a stay in the troublous times which appeared to lie not far ahead—this evening. Then Mr. Preston and her little adventure with him came uppermost. How angry he looked! How could Cynthia have liked him even enough to get into this abominable scrape, which was, however, all over now! And so she ran on in her fancies and imaginations, little dreaming that that very night much talk was going on not half-a-mile from where she sate sewing, that could prove that the "scrape" (as she called it, in her girlish phraseology) was not all over.

Scandal sleeps in the summer, comparatively speaking. Its nature is the reverse of that of the dormouse. Warm ambient air, loiterings abroad, gardenings, flowers to talk about, and preserves to make, soothed the wicked imp to slumber in the parish of Hollingford in summer-time. But when evenings grew short, and people gathered round the fires, and put their feet in a circle—not on the fenders, that was not allowed—then was the time for confidential conversation! Or in the pauses allowed for the tea-trays to circulate among the card-tables—when those who were peaceably inclined tried to stop the warm discussions about "the odd trick," and the rather wearisome feminine way of "shouldering the crutch, and showing how fields were won"—small crumbs and scraps of daily news came up to the surface, such as "Martindale has raised the price of his best joints a half-penny in the pound;" or, "It's a shame of Sir Harry to order in another book on farriery into the Book Society; Phœbe and I tried to read it, but really there is no general interest in it;" or, "I wonder what Mr. Ashton will do, now Nancy is going to be married! Why, she's been with him these seventeen years! It's a very foolish thing for a woman of her age to be thinking of matrimony; and so I told her, when I met her in the market-place this morning!"

So said Miss Browning on the night in question; her hand of cards lying by her on the puce baize-covered table, while she munched the rich pound-cake of a certain Mrs. Dawes, lately come to inhabit Hollingford.

"Matrimony's not so bad as you think for, Miss Browning," said Mrs. Goodenough, standing up for the holy estate into which she had twice entered. If I had ha' seen Nancy, I should ha' given her my mind very different. It's a great thing to be able to settle

what you'll have for dinner, without never a one interfering with you."

"If that's all!" said Miss Browning, drawing herself up, "I can do that; and, perhaps, better than a woman who has a husband to please."

"No one can say as I didn't please my husbands—both on 'em, though Jeremy was tickler in his tastes than poor Harry Beaver. But as I used to say to 'em, 'Leave the victual to me; it's better for you than knowing what's to come beforehand. The stomach likes to be taken by surprise. And neither of 'em ever repented 'em of their confidence. You may take my word for it, beans and bacon will taste better (and Mr. Ashton's Nancy in her own house) than all the sweetbreads and spring chickens she's been a-doing for him this seventeen years. But if I chose, I could tell you of something as would interest you all a deal more than old Nancy's marriage to a widower with nine children—only as the young folks themselves is meeting in private, clandestine-like, it's perhaps not for me to tell their secrets."

"I'm sure I don't want to hear of clandestine meetings between young men and young women," said Miss Browning, throwing up her head. "It's disgrace enough to the people themselves, I consider, if they enter on a love affair without the proper sanction of parents. I know public opinion has changed on the subject; but when poor Gratia was married to Mr. Byerley, he wrote to my father without ever having so much as paid her a compliment, or said more than the most trivial and commonplace things to her; and my father and mother sent for her into my father's study, and she said she was never so much frightened in her life,—and they said it was a very good offer, and Mr. Byerley was a very worthy man, and they hoped she would behave properly to him when he came to supper that night. And after that he was allowed to come twice a week till they were married. My mother and I sate at our work in the bow-window of the Rectory drawing-room, and Gratia and Mr. Byerley at the other end; and my mother always called my attention to some flower or plant in the garden when it struck nine, for that was his time for going. Without offence to the present company, I am rather inclined to look upon matrimony as a weakness to which some very worthy people are prone; but if they must be married, let them make the best of it, and go through the affair with dignity and propriety: or if there

are misdoings and clandestine meetings, and such things, at any rate, never let me hear about them! I think it's you to play, Mrs. Dawes. You'll excuse my frankness on the subject of matrimony! Mrs. Goodenough there can tell you I'm a very outspoken person.

"It's not the out-speaking, it's what you say that goes against me, Miss Browning," said Mrs. Goodenough, affronted, yet ready to play her card as soon as needed. And as for Mrs. Dawes, she was too anxious to get into the genteelest of all (Hollingford) society to object to whatever Miss Browning (who, in right of being a deceased rector's daughter, rather represented the selectest circle of the little town) advocated—celibacy, marriage, bigamy, or polygamy.

So the remainder of the evening passed over without any further reference to the secret Mrs. Goodenough was burning to disclose, unless a remark made *àpropos de rien* by Miss Browning, during the silence of a deal, could be supposed to have connection with the previous conversation. She said suddenly and abruptly,—

"I don't know what I have done that any man should make me his slave." If she was referring to any prospect of matrimonial danger she saw opening before her fancy, she might have been comforted. But it was a remark of which no one took any notice, all being far too much engaged in the rubber. Only when Miss Browning took her early leave (for Miss Phœbe had a cold, and was an invalid at home), Mrs. Goodenough burst out with—

"Well! now I may speak out my mind, and say as how if there was a slave between us two, when Goodenough was alive, it wasn't me; and I don't think as it was pretty in Miss Browning to give herself such airs on her virginity when there was four widows in the room,—who've had six honest men among 'em for husbands. No offence, Miss Airy!" addressing an unfortunate little spinster, who found herself the sole representative of celibacy now that Miss Browning was gone. "I could tell her of a girl as she's very fond on, who's on the high road to matrimony; and in as cunning a way as ever I heard on; going out at dusk to meet her sweetheart, just as if she was my Betty, or your Jenny. And her name is Molly too,—which, as I have often thought, shows a low taste in them as first called her so;—she might as well be a scullery-maid

at oncest. Not that she's picked up anybody common; she's looked about her for a handsome fellow, and a smart young man enough!"

Every one around the table looked curious and intent on the disclosures being made, except the hostess, Mrs. Dawes, who smiled intelligence with her eyes, and knowingly pursed up her mouth until Mrs. Goodenough had finished her tale. Then she said demurely,—

"I suppose you mean Mr. Preston and Miss Gibson?"

"Why, who told you?" said Mrs. Goodenough, turning round upon her in surprise. "You can't say as I did. There's many a Molly in Hollingford, besides her,—though none, perhaps, in such a genteel station in life. I never named her, I'm sure."

"No. But I know. I could tell my tale too," continued Mrs. Dawes.

"No! could you, really?" said Mrs. Goodenough, very curious and a little jealous.

"Yes. My uncle Sheepshanks came upon them in the Park Avenue,—he startled 'em a good deal, he said; and when he taxed Mr. Preston with being with his sweetheart, he didn't deny it."

"Well! Now so much has come out, I'll tell you what I know. Only, ladies, I wouldn't wish to do the girl an unkind turn,—so you must keep what I've got to tell you a secret." Of course they promised; that was easy.

"My Hannah, as married Tom Oakes, and lives in Pearson's Lane, was a-gathering of damsons only a week ago, and Molly Gibson was a-walking fast down the lane,—quite in a hurry like to meet some one,—and Hannah's little Anna-Maria fell down, and Molly (who's a kind-hearted lass enough) picked her up; so if Hannah had had her doubts before, she had none then."

"But there was no one with her, was there?" asked one of the ladies, anxiously, as Mrs. Goodenough stopped to finish her piece of cake, just at this crisis.

"No: I said she looked as if she was going to meet some one,—and by-and-by comes Mr. Preston running out of the wood just beyond Hannah's, and says he, 'A cup of water, please, good woman, for a lady has fainted, or is 'sterical or something.' Now though he didn't know Hannah, Hannah knew him. 'More folks know Tom Fool, than Tom Fool knows,' asking Mr. Preston's

pardon; for he's no fool whatever he be. And I could tell you more,—and what I've seed with my own eyes. I seed her give him a letter in Grinstead's shop, only yesterday, and he looked as black as thunder at her, for he seed me if she didn't."

"It's a very suitable kind of thing," said Miss Airy; "why do they make such a mystery of it?"

"Some folks like it," said Mrs. Dawes; "it adds zest to it all, to do their courting underhand."

"Ay, it's like salt to their victual," put in Mrs. Goodenough. "But I didn't think Molly Gibson was one of that sort, I didn't."

"The Gibsons hold themselves very high?" cried Mrs. Dawes, more as an inquiry than an assertion. "Mrs. Gibson has called upon me."

"Ay, you're like to be a patient of the doctor's," put in Mrs. Goodenough.

"She seemed to me very affable, though she is so intimate with the Countess and the family at the Towers; and is quite the lady herself; dines late, I've heard, and everything in style."

"Style! very different style to what Bob Gibson, her husband, was used to when first he came here,—glad of a mutton-chop in his surgery, for I doubt if he'd a fire anywhere else; we called him Bob Gibson then, but none on us dare Bob him now; I'd as soon think o' calling him sweep!"

"I think it looks very bad for Miss Gibson!" said one lady, rather anxious to bring back the conversation to the more interesting present time. But as soon as Mrs. Goodenough heard this natural comment on the disclosures she had made, she fired round on the speaker:—

"Not at all bad, and I'll trouble you not to use such a word as that about Molly Gibson, as I've known all her life. It's odd, if you will. I was odd myself as a girl; I never could abide a plate of gathered gooseberries, but I must needs go and skulk behind a bush and gather 'em for myself. It's some folk's taste, though it mayn't be Miss Browning's, who'd have all the courting done under the nose of the family. All as ever I said was that I was surprised at it in Molly Gibson; and that I'd ha' thought it was liker that pretty piece of a Cynthia as they call her; indeed, at one time I was ready to swear as it was her Mr. Preston was after. And now,

ladies, I'll wish you a very good night. I cannot abide waste; and I'll venture for it Hetty's letting the candle in the lantern run all to grease, instead of putting it out, as I've told her to do, if ever she's got to wait for me."

So with formal dipping curtseys the ladies separated, but not without thanking Mrs. Dawes for the pleasant evening they had had; a piece of old-fashioned courtesy always gone through in those days.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SCANDAL AND ITS VICTIMS.

When Mr. Gibson returned to Hollingford, he found an accumulation of business waiting for him, and he was much inclined to complain of the consequences of the two days' comparative holiday, which had resulted in over-work for the week to come. He had hardly time to speak to his family, he had so immediately to rush off to pressing cases of illness. But Molly managed to arrest him in the hall, standing there with his great coat held out ready for him to put on, but whispering as she did so—

"Papa! Mr. Osborne Hamley was here to see you yesterday. He looks very ill, and he's evidently frightened about himself."

Mr. Gibson faced about, and looked at her for a moment; but all he said was—

"I'll go and see him; don't tell your mother where I'm gone: you've not mentioned this to her, I hope?"

"No," said Molly, for she had only told Mrs. Gibson of Osborne's call, not of the occasion for it.

"Don't say anything about it; there's no need. Now I think of it, I can't possibly go to-day,—but I will go."

Something in her father's manner disheartened Molly, who had persuaded herself that Osborne's evident illness was partly "nervous," by which she meant imaginary. She had dwelt upon his looks of enjoyment at Miss Phœbe's perplexity, and thought that no one really believing himself to be in danger could have given the merry glances which he had done; but after seeing the seriousness of her father's face, she recurred to the shock she had experienced on first seeing Osborne's changed appearance. All this time Mrs. Gibson was busy reading a letter from Cynthia which Mr. Gibson had brought from London; for every opportunity of private conveyance

was seized upon when postage was so high; and Cynthia had forforgotten so many things in her hurried packing, that she now sent a list of the clothes which she required. Molly almost wondered that it had not come to her; but she did not understand the sort of reserve that was springing up in Cynthia's mind towards her. Cynthia herself struggled with the feeling, and tried to fight against it by calling herself "ungrateful;" but the truth was, she believed that she no longer held her former high place in Molly's estimation and she could not help turning away from one who knew things to her discredit. She was fully aware of Molly's prompt decision and willing action, where action was especially disagreeable, on her behalf; she knew that Molly would never bring up the past errors and difficulties; but still the consciousness that the good, straightforward girl had learnt that Cynthia had been guilty of so much underhand work cooled her regard, and restrained her willingness of intercourse. Reproach herself with ingratitude as she would, she could not help feeling glad to be away from Molly; it was awkward to speak to her as if nothing had happened; it was awkward to write to her about forgotten ribbons and laces, when their last conversation had been on such different subjects, and had called out such vehement expressions of feeling. So Mrs. Gibson held the list in her hand, and read out the small fragments of news that were intermixed with notices of Cynthia's requirements.

"Helen cannot be so very ill," said Molly at length, "or Cyn would not want her pink muslin and daisy wreath."

"I don't see that that follows, I'm sure" replied Mrs. Gibson rather sharply. "Helen would never be so selfish as to tie Cynthia to her side, however ill she was. Indeed, I should not have felt that it was my duty to let Cynthia go to London at all, if I had thought she was to be perpetually exposed to the depressing atmosphere of a sick-room. Besides, it must be so good for Helen to have Cynthia coming in with bright pleasant accounts of the parties she has been to—even if Cynthia disliked gaiety I should desire her to sacrifice herself and go out as much as she could, for Helen's sake. My idea of nursing is that one should not be always thinking of one's own feelings and wishes, but doing those things which will most serve to beguile the weary hours of an invalid. But then so few people have had to consider the subject so deeply as I have done!"

Mrs. Gibson here thought fit to sigh before going on with Cynthia's letter. As far as Molly could make any sense out of this rather incoherent epistle, very incoherently read aloud to her, Cynthia was really pleased, and glad to be of use and comfort to Helen, but at the same time very ready to be easily persuaded into the perpetual small gaieties which abounded in her uncle's house in London, even at this dead season of the year. Mrs. Gibson came upon Mr. Henderson's name once, and then went on with a running um-um-um to herself, which sounded very mysterious, but which might as well have been omitted, as all that Cynthia really said about him was, "Mr. Henderson's mother has advised my aunt to consult a certain Dr. Donaldson, who is said to be very clever in such cases as Helen's, but my uncle is not sufficiently sure of the professional etiquette, &c." Then there came a very affectionate, carefully worded message to Molly,—implying a good deal more than was said of loving gratitude for the trouble she had taken in Cynthia's behalf. And that was all; and Molly went away a little depressed; she knew not why.

The operation on Lady Cumnor had been successfully performed, and in a few days they hoped to bring her down to the Towers to recruit her strength in the fresh country air. The case was one which interested Mr. Gibson extremely, and in which his opinion had been proved to be right, in opposition to that of one or two great names in London. The consequence was that he was frequently consulted and referred to during the progress of her recovery; and, as he had much to do in the immediate circle of his Hollingford practice, as well as to write thoughtful letters to his medical brethren in London, he found it difficult to spare the three or four hours necessary to go over to Hamley to see Osborne. He wrote to him, however, begging him to reply immediately and detail his symptoms; and from the answer he received he did not imagine that the case was immediately pressing. Osborne, too, deprecated his coming over to Hamley for the express purpose of seeing him. So the visit was deferred to that "more convenient season" which is so often too late.

All these days the buzzing gossip about Molly's meetings with Mr. Preston, her clandestine correspondence, the secret interviews in lonely places, had been gathering strength, and assuming the positive form of scandal. The simple innocent girl, who walked through the quiet streets without a thought of being the object of mysterious

implications, became for a time the unconscious black sheep of the town. Servants heard part of what was said in their mistresses' drawing-rooms, and exaggerated the sayings amongst themselves with the coarse strengthening of expression common with uneducated people. Mr. Preston himself became aware that her name was being coupled with his, though hardly of the extent to which the love of excitement and gossip had carried people's speeches; he chuckled over the mistake, but took no pains to correct it. "It serves her right," said he to himself, "for meddling with other folk's business," and he felt himself avenged for the discomfiture which her menace of appealing to Lady Harriet had caused him, and the mortification he had experienced in learning from her plain-speaking lips, how he had been talked over by Cynthia and herself, with personal dislike on the one side, and evident contempt on the other. Besides if any denial of Mr. Preston's stirred up an examination as to the real truth, more might come out of his baffled endeavours to compel Cynthia to keep to her engagement to him than he cared to have known. He was angry with himself for still loving Cynthia; loving her in his own fashion, be it understood. He told himself that many a woman of more position and wealth would be glad enough to have him; some of them pretty women too. And he asked himself why he was such a confounded fool as to go on hankering after a penniless girl, who was as fickle as the wind? The answer was silly enough, logically; but forcible in fact. Cynthia was Cynthia, and not Venus herself could have been her substitute. In this one thing Mr. Preston was more really true than many worthy men; who, seeking to be married, turn with careless facility from the unattainable to the attainable, and keep their feelings and fancy tolerably loose till they find a woman who consents to be their wife. But no one would ever be to Mr. Preston what Cynthia had been, and was; and yet he could have stabbed her in certain of his moods. So, Molly, who had come between him and the object of his desire, was not likely to find favour in his sight, or to obtain friendly actions from him.

There came a time—not very distant from the evening at Mrs. Dawes'—when Molly felt that people looked askance at her. Mrs. Goodenough openly pulled her grand-daughter away, when the young girl stopped to speak to Molly in the street, and an engagement which the two had made for a long walk together was cut very short by a very trumpery excuse. Mrs. Good-

enough explained her conduct in the following manner to some of her friends :—

"You see, I don't think the worse of a girl for meeting her sweetheart here and there and everywhere, till she gets talked about ; but then when she does—and Molly Gibson's name is in everybody's mouth—I think it's only fair to Bessy, who has trusted me with Annabella—not to let her daughter be seen with a lass who has managed her matters so badly as to set folk talking about her. My maxim is this,—and it's a very good working one, you may depend on't—women should mind what they're about, and never be talked of; and if a woman's talked of, the less her friends have to do with her till the talk has died away, the better. So Annabella is not to have anything to do with Molly Gibson, this visit at any rate."

For a good while the Miss Brownings were kept in ignorance of the evil tongues that whispered hard words about Molly. Miss Browning was known to "have a temper," and by instinct every one who came in contact with her shrank from irritating that temper by uttering the slightest syllable against the smallest of those creatures over whom she spread the ægis of her love. She would and did reproach them herself; she used to boast that she never spared them : but no one else might touch them with the slightest slur of a passing word. But Miss Phœbe inspired no such terror; the great reason why she did not hear of the gossip against Molly as early as any one, was that, although she was not the rose, she lived near the rose. Besides, she was of so tender a nature that even thick-skinned Mrs. Goodenough was unwilling to say what would give her pain; and it was the new-comer Mrs. Dawes, who in all ignorance alluded to the town's talk, as to something of which Miss Phœbe must be aware. Then Miss Phœbe poured down her questions, although she protested, even with tears, her total disbelief in all the answers she received. It was a small act of heroism on her part to keep all that she then learnt a secret from her sister Dorothy, as she did for four or five day; till Miss Browning attacked her one evening with the following speech :—

"Phœbe ! either you've some reason for puffing yourself out with sighs, or you've not. If you have a reason, it's your duty to tell it me directly ; and if you haven't a reason, you must break yourself of a bad habit that is growing upon you."

"Oh, sister ! do you think it is really my duty to tell you ? it

would be such a comfort; but then I thought I ought not; it will distress you so."

"Nonsense. I am so well prepared for misfortune by the frequent contemplation of its possibility that I believe I can receive any ill news with apparent equanimity and real resignation. Besides, when you said yesterday at breakfast-time that you meant to give up the day to making your drawers tidy, I was aware that some misfortune was impending, though of course I could not judge of its magnitude. Is the Highchester Bank broken?"

"Oh no, sister!" said Miss Phœbe, moving to a seat close to her sister's on the sofa. "Have you really been thinking that! I wish I had told you what I heard at the very first, if you've been fancying that!"

"Take warning, Phœbe, and learn to have no concealments from me. I did think we must be ruined, from your ways of going on: eating no meat at dinner, and sighing continually. And now what is it?"

"I hardly know how to tell you, Dorothy. I really don't."

Miss Phœbe began to cry; Miss Browning took hold of her arm, and gave her a little sharp shake.

"Cry as much as you like when you've told me; but don't cry now, child, when you're keeping me on the tenter-hooks."

"Molly Gibson has lost her character, sister. That's it."

"Molly Gibson has done no such thing," said Miss Browning indignantly. "How dare you repeat such stories about poor Mary's child. Never let me hear you say such things again."

"I can't help it: Mrs. Dawes told me; and she says it's all over the town. I told her I did not believe a word of it. And I kept it from you; and I think I should have been really ill if I'd kept it to myself any longer. Oh, sister! what are you going to do?"

For Miss Browning had risen without speaking a word, and was leaving the room in a stately and determined fashion.

"I'm going to put on my bonnet and things, and then I shall call upon Mrs. Dawes, and confront her with her lies."

"Oh, don't call them lies, sister; it's such a strong, ugly word. Please call them tallydiddles, for I don't believe she meant any harm. Besides—besides—if they should turn out to be truth? Really, sister, that's the weight on my mind; so many things sounded as if they might be true."

"What things?" said Miss Browning, still standing with judicial erectness of position in the middle of the floor.

"Why—one story was that Molly had given him a letter."

"Who's him? How am I to understand a story told in that silly way?" Miss Browning sat down on the nearest chair, and made up her mind to be patient if she could.

"Him is Mr. Preston. And that must be true; because I missed her from my side when I wanted to ask if she thought blue would look green by candlelight, as the young man said it would, and she had run across the street, and Mrs. Goodenough was just going into the shop, just as she said she was."

Miss Browning's distress was overcoming her anger; so she only said, "Phœbe, I think you'll drive me mad. Do tell me what you heard from Mrs. Dawes in a sensible and coherent manner, for once in your life."

"I'm sure I'm trying with all my might to tell you everything just as it happened."

"What did you hear from Mrs. Dawes?"

"Why, that Molly and Mr. Preston were keeping company just as if she was a maid-servant and he was a gardener: meeting at all sorts of improper times and places, and fainting away in his arms, and out at night together, and writing to each other, and slipping their letters into each other's hands; and that was what I was talking about, sister, for I next door to saw that done once. I saw her with my own eyes run across the street to Grinstead's, where he was, for we had just left him there; with a letter in her hand, too, which was not there when she came back all fluttered and blushing. But I never thought anything of it at the time; but now all the town is talking about it, and crying shame, and saying they ought to be married." Miss Phœbe sank into sobbing again; but was suddenly roused by a good box on her ear. Miss Browning was standing over her almost trembling with passion.

"Phœbe, if ever I hear you say such things again, I'll turn you out of the house that minute."

"I only said what Mrs. Dawes said, and you asked me what it was," replied Miss Phœbe, humbly and meekly. "Dorothy, you should not have done that."

"Never mind whether I should or I shouldn't. That's not the matter in hand. What I've got to decide is, how to put a stop to all these lies."

"But, Dorothy, they are not all lies—if you will call them so; I'm afraid some things are true; though I stuck to their being false when Mrs. Dawes told me of them."

"If I go to Mrs. Dawes, and she repeats them to me, I shall slap her face or box her ears I'm afraid, for I couldn't stand tales being told of poor Mary's daughter, as if they were just a stirring piece of news like James Horrock's pig with two heads," said Miss Browning, meditating aloud. "That would do harm instead of good. Phœbe, I'm really sorry I boxed your ears, only I should do it again if you said the same things." Phœbe sate down by her sister, and took hold of one of her withered hands, and began caressing it, which was her way of accepting her sister's expression of regret. "If I speak to Molly, the child will deny it, if she's half as good-for-nothing as they say; and if she's not, she'll only worry herself to death. No, that won't do. Mrs. Goodenough—but she's a donkey; and if I convinced her, she could never convince any one else. No; Mrs. Dawes, who told you, shall tell me, and I'll tie my hands together inside my muff, and bind myself over to keep the peace. And when I've heard what is to be heard, I'll put the matter into Mr. Gibson's hands. That's what I'll do. So it's no use your saying anything against it, Phœbe, for I shan't attend to you."

Miss Browning went to Mrs. Dawes' and began civilly enough to make inquiries concerning the reports current in Hollingford about Molly and Mr. Preston; and Mrs. Dawes fell into the snare, and told all the real and fictitious circumstances of the story in circulation, quite unaware of the storm that was gathering and ready to fall upon her as soon as she had stopped speaking. But she had not the long habit of reverence for Miss Browning, which would have kept so many Hollingford ladies from justifying themselves if she found fault. Mrs. Dawes stood up for herself and her own veracity, bringing out fresh scandal, which she said she did not believe, but that many did; and adducing so much evidence as to the truth of what she had said and did believe, that Miss Browning was almost quelled, and sate silent and miserable at the end of Mrs. Dawes' justification of herself.

"Well!" she said at length, rising up from her chair as she spoke, "I'm very sorry I've lived till this day; it's a blow to me just as if I had heard of such goings-on in my own flesh and blood. I suppose I ought to apologize to you, Mrs. Dawes, for what I said; but I've no heart to do it to-day. I ought not to have spoken as I did; but that's nothing to this affair, you see."

"I hope you do me the justice to perceive that I only repeated what I had heard on good authority, Miss Browning," said Mrs. Dawes in reply.

"My dear, don't repeat evil on any authority unless you can do some good by speaking about it," said Miss Browning, laying her hand on Mrs. Dawes' shoulder. "I'm not a good woman, but I know what is good, and that advice is. And now I think I can tell you that I beg your pardon for flying out upon you so; but God knows what pain you were putting me to. You'll forgive me, won't you, my dear?" Mrs. Dawes felt the hand trembling on her shoulder, and saw the real distress of Miss Browning's mind, so it was not difficult for her to grant the requested forgiveness. Then Miss Browning went home, and said but a few words to Phœbe, who indeed saw well enough that her sister had heard the reports confirmed, and needed no further explanation of the cause of scarcely-tasted dinner, and short replies, and saddened looks. Presently Miss Browning sate down and wrote a short note. Then she rang the bell, and told the little maiden who answered it to take it to Mr. Gibson, and if he was out to see that it was given to him as soon as ever he came home. And then she went and put on her Sunday cap; and Miss Phœbe knew that her sister had written to ask Mr. Gibson to come and be told of the rumours affecting his daughter. Miss Browning was sadly disturbed at the information she had received, and the task that lay before her; she was miserably uncomfortable to herself and irritable to Miss Phœbe, and the netting-cotton she was using kept continually snapping and breaking from the jerks of her nervous hands. When the knock at the door was heard,—the well-known doctor's knock,—Miss Browning took off her spectacles, and dropped them on the carpet, breaking them as she did so; and then she bade Miss Phœbe leave the room, as if her presence had cast the evil-eye, and caused the misfortune. She wanted to look natural, and was distressed at forgetting whether she usually received him sitting or standing.

"Well!" said he, coming in cheerfully, and rubbing his cold hands as he went straight to the fire, "and what is the matter with us? It's Phœbe, I suppose? I hope none of those old spasms? But, after all, a dose or two will set that to rights."

"Oh! Mr. Gibson, I wish it was Phœbe, or me either!" said Miss Browning, trembling more and more.

He sate down by her patiently, when he saw her agitation, and took her hand in a kind, friendly manner.

"Don't hurry yourself,—take your time. I daresay it's not so bad as you fancy; but we'll see about it. There's a great deal of help in the world, much as we abuse it."

"Mr. Gibson," said she, "it's your Molly I'm so grieved about. It's out now, and God help us both, and the poor child too, for I'm sure she's been led astray, and not gone wrong by her own free will?"

"Molly!" said he, fighting against her words. "What's my little Molly been doing or saying?"

"Oh! Mr. Gibson, I don't know how to tell you. I never would have named it, if I had not been convinced, sorely, sorely against my will."

"At any rate, you can let me hear what you've heard," said he, putting his elbow on the table, and screening his eyes with his hand. "Not that I'm a bit afraid of anything you can hear about my girl," continued he. "Only in this little nest of gossip, it's as well to know what people are talking about."

"They say—oh! how shall I tell you?"

"Go on, can't you?" said he, removing his hand from his blazing eyes. "I'm not going to believe it, so don't be afraid!"

"But I fear you must believe it. I would not if I could help it. She's been carrying on a clandestine correspondence with Mr. Preston!——"

"Mr. Preston!" exclaimed he.

"And meeting him at all sorts of unseemly places and hours, out of doors,—in the dark,—fainting away in his—his arms, if I must speak out. All the town is talking of it." Mr. Gibson's hand was over his eyes again, and he made no sign; so Miss Browning went on, adding touch to touch. "Mr. Sheepshanks saw them together. They have exchanged notes in Grinstead's shop; she ran after him there."

"Be quiet, can't you?" said Mr. Gibson, taking his hand away, and showing his grim set face. "I've heard enough. Don't go on. I said I shouldn't believe it, and I don't. I suppose I must thank you for telling me; but I can't yet."

"I don't want your thanks," said Miss Browning, almost crying. "I thought you ought to know; for though you're married again, I

can't forget you were dear Mary's husband once upon a time ; and Molly's her child."

"I'd rather not speak any more about it just at present," said he, not at all replying to Miss Browning's last speech. "I may not control myself as I ought. I only wish I could meet Preston, and horsewhip him within an inch of his life. I wish I'd the doctoring of these slanderous gossips. I'd make their tongues lie still for a while. My little girl ! What harm has she done them all, that they should go and foul her fair name ? "

"Indeed, Mr. Gibson, I'm afraid it's all true. I would not have sent for you if I hadn't examined into it. Do ascertain the truth before you do anything violent, such as horsewhipping or poisoning."

With all the *inconséquence* of a man in a passion, Mr. Gibson laughed out, "What have I said about horsewhipping or poisoning? Do you think I'd have Molly's name dragged about the streets in connection with any act of violence on my part. Let the report die away as it arose. Time will prove its falsehood."

"But I don't think it will, and that's the pity of it," said Miss Browning. "You must do something, but I don't know what."

"I shall go home and ask Molly herself what's the meaning of it all ; that's all I shall do. It's too ridiculous—knowing Molly as I do, it's perfectly ridiculous." He got up and walked about the room with hasty steps, laughing short unnatural laughs from time to time. "Really what will they say next? 'Satan finds some mischief still for idle tongues to do.' "

"Don't talk of Satan, please, in this house. No one knows what may happen, if he's lightly spoken about," pleaded Miss Browning.

He went on, without noticing her, talking to himself,—"I've a great mind to leave the place ;—and what food for scandal that piece of folly would give rise to ! " Then he was silent for a time ; his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the ground, as he continued his quarter-deck march. Suddenly he stopped close to Miss Browning's chair. "I'm thoroughly ungrateful to you, for as true a mark of friendship as you've ever shown me. True or false, it was right I should know the wretched scandal that was being circulated ; and it couldn't have been pleasant for you to tell it me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Indeed, Mr. Gibson, if it was false I would never have named it, but let it die away."

"It's not true, though!" said he, doggedly, letting drop the hand he had taken in his effusion of gratitude.

She shook her head. "I shall always love Molly for her mother's sake," she said. And it was a great concession from the correct Miss Browning. But her father did not understand it as such.

"You ought to love her for her own. She has done nothing to disgrace herself. I shall go straight home, and probe into the truth."

"As if the poor girl who has been led away into deceit already would scruple much at going on in falsehood," was Miss Browning's remark on this last speech of Mr. Gibson's; but she had discretion enough not to make it until he was well out of hearing.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN INNOCENT CULPRIT.

With his head bent down—as if he were facing some keen-blowing wind—and yet there was not a breath of air stirring—Mr. Gibson went swiftly to his own home. He rang at the door-bell; an unusual proceeding on his part. Maria opened the door. "Go and tell Miss Molly she's wanted in the dining-room. Don't say who it is that wants her." There was something in Mr. Gibson's manner that made Maria obey him to the letter, in spite of Molly's surprised question.

"Wants me? Who is it, Maria?"

Mr. Gibson went into the dining-room, and shut the door, for an instant's solitude. He went up to the chimney-piece, took hold of it, and laid his head on his hands, and tried to still the beating of his heart.

The door opened. He knew that Molly stood there before he heard her tone of astonishment.

"Papa!"

"Hush!" said he, turning round sharply. "Shut the door Come here."

She came to him, wondering what was amiss. Her thoughts went to the Hamleys immediately. "Is it Osborne?" she asked, breathless. If Mr. Gibson had not been too much agitated to judge calmly, he might have deduced comfort from these three words.

But instead of allowing himself to seek for comfort from collateral evidence, he said,—"Molly, what is this I hear? That you have been keeping up a clandestine intercourse with Mr. Preston—meeting him in out-of-the-way places; exchanging letters with him in a stealthy way?"

Though he had professed to disbelieve all this, and did disbelieve

it at the bottom of his soul, his voice was hard and stern, his face was white and grim, and his eyes fixed Molly's with the terrible keenness of their research. Molly trembled all over, but she did not attempt to evade his penetration. If she was silent for a moment, it was because she was rapidly reviewing her relation with regard to Cynthia in the matter. It was but a moment's pause of silence; but it seemed long minutes to one who was craving for a burst of indignant denial. He had taken hold of her two arms just above her wrists, as she had just advanced towards him; he was unconscious of this action; but, as his impatience for her words grew upon him, he grasped her more and more tightly in his vice-like hands, till she made a little involuntary sound of pain. And then he let go; and she looked at her soft bruised flesh, with tears gathering fast to her eyes to think that he, her father, should have hurt her so. At the instant, it appeared to her stranger that he should inflict bodily pain upon his child, than that he should have heard the truth—even in an exaggerated form. With a childish gesture she held out her arm to him; but if she expected pity, she received none.

"Pooh!" said he, as he just glanced at the mark, "that is nothing—nothing. Answer my question. Have you—have you met that man in private?"

"Yes, papa, I have; but I don't think it was wrong."

He sate down now. "Wrong!" he echoed, bitterly. "Not wrong? Well! I must bear it somehow. Your mother is dead. That's one comfort. It is true, then, is it? Why, I did not believe it—not I. I laughed in my sleeve at their credulity; and I was the dupe all the time!"

"Papa, I cannot tell you all. It is not my secret, or you should know it directly. Indeed, you will be sorry some time—I have never deceived you yet, have I!" trying to take one of his hands; but he kept them tightly in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the pattern of the carpet before him. "Papa!" said she, pleading again, "have I ever deceived you?"

"How can I tell? I hear of this from the town's talk. I don't know what next may come out!"

"The town's talk," said Molly in dismay. "What business is it of theirs?"

"Every one makes it their business to cast dirt on a girl's name who has disregarded the commonest rules of modesty and propriety."

"Papa, you are very hard. Modesty disregarded! I will tell you exactly what I have done. I met Mr. Preston once,—that evening when you put me down to walk over Croston Heath,—and there was another person with him. I met him a second time—and that time by appointment—nobody but our two selves,—in the Towers' Park. That is all, papa. You must trust me. I cannot explain more. You must trust me indeed."

He could not help relenting at her words; there was such truth in the tone in which they were spoken. But he neither spoke nor stirred for a minute or two. Then he raised his eyes to hers for the first time since she had acknowledged the external truth of what he charged her with. Her face was very white, but it bore the impress of the final sincerity of death, when the true expression prevails without the poor disguises of time.

"The letters?" he said,—but almost as if he were ashamed to question that countenance any further.

"I gave him one letter,—of which I did not write a word,—which, in fact, I believe to have been merely an envelope, without any writing whatever inside. The giving that letter,—the two interviews I have named,—make all the private intercourse I have had with Mr. Preston. Oh! papa, what have they been saying that has grieved—shocked you so much?"

"Never mind. As the world goes, what you say you have done, Molly, is ground enough. You must tell me all. I must be able to refute these rumours point by point."

"How are they to be refuted; when you say that the truth which I have acknowledged is ground enough for what people are saying?"

"You say you were not acting for yourself, but for another. If you tell me who the other was,—if you tell me everything out fully, I will do my utmost to screen her—for of course I guess it was Cynthia—while I am exonerating you."

"No, papa!" said Molly, after some little consideration; "I have told you all I can tell; all that concerns myself; and I have promised not to say one word more."

"Then your character will be impugned. It must be, unless the fullest explanation of these secret meetings is given. I've a great mind to force the whole truth out of Preston himself!"

"Papa! once again I beg you to trust me. If you ask Mr. Preston you will very likely hear the whole truth; but that

is just what I have been trying so hard to conceal, for it will only make several people very unhappy if it is known, and the whole affair is over and done with now."

"Not your share in it. Miss Browning sent for me this evening to tell me how people were talking about you. She implied that it was a complete loss of your good name. You don't know, Molly, how slight a thing may blacken a girl's reputation for life. I'd hard work to stand all she said, even though I didn't believe a word of it at the time. And now you've told me that much of it is true."

"But I think you are a brave man, papa. And you believe me, don't you? We shall outlive those rumours, never fear."

"You don't know the power of ill-natured tongues, child," said he.

"Oh, now you've called me 'child' again I don't care for anything. Dear, dear papa, I'm sure it is best and wisest to take no notice of these speeches. After all, they may not mean them ill-naturedly. I am sure Miss Browning would not. By-and-by they'll quite forget how much they made out of so little,—and even if they don't, you would not have me break my solemn word, would you?"

"Perhaps not. But I cannot easily forgive the person who, by practising on your generosity, led you into this scrape. You are very young, and look upon these things as merely temporary evils. I have more experience."

"Still I don't see what I can do now, papa. Perhaps I've been foolish; but what I did, I did of my own self. It was not suggested to me. And I'm sure it was not wrong in morals, whatever it might be in judgment. As I said, it's all over now; what I did ended the affair, I am thankful to say; and it was with that object I did it. If people choose to talk about me, I must submit; and so must you, dear papa."

"Does your mother—does Mrs. Gibson—know anything about it?" asked he with sudden anxiety.

"No; not a bit; not a word. Pray don't name it to her. That might lead to more mischief than anything else. I have really told you everything I am at liberty to tell."

It was a great relief to Mr. Gibson to find that this sudden fear that his wife might have been privy to it all was ill-founded. He had been seized by a sudden dread that she, whom he had chosen to marry in order to have a protectress and guide for his daughter,

had been cognizant of this ill-advised adventure with Mr. Preston; nay, more, that she might even have instigated it to save her own child; for that Cynthia was, somehow or other, at the bottom of it all he had no doubt whatever. But now, at any rate, Mrs. Gibson had not been playing a treacherous part; that was all the comfort he could extract out of Molly's mysterious admission, that much mischief might result from Mrs. Gibson's knowing anything about these meetings with Mr. Preston.

"Then, what is to be done?" said he. "These reports are abroad,—am I to do nothing to contradict them? Am I to go about smiling and content with all this talk about you, passing from one idle gossip to another?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm very sorry, for I never meant you to have known anything about it, and I can see now how it must distress you. But surely when nothing more happens, and nothing comes of what has happened, the wonder and the gossip must die away. I know you believe every word I have said, and that you trust me, papa? Please, for my sake, be patient with all this gossip and cackle."

"It will try me hard, Molly," said he.

"For my sake, papa!"

"I don't see what else I can do," replied he moodily, "unless I get hold of Preston."

"That would be the worst of all. That would make a talk. And, after all, perhaps he was not so much to blame. Yes! he was. But he behaved well to me as far as that goes," said she, suddenly recollecting his speech when Mr. Sheepshanks came up in the Towers' Park—"Don't stir, you have done nothing to be ashamed of."

"That's true. A quarrel between men which drags a woman's name into notice is to be avoided at any cost. But sooner or later I must have it out with Preston. He shall find it not so pleasant to have placed my daughter in equivocal circumstances."

"He didn't place me. He didn't know I was coming, didn't expect to meet me either time; and would far rather not have taken the letter I gave him, if he could have helped himself."

"It's all a mystery. I hate to have you mixed up in mysteries."

"I hate to be mixed up. But what can I do? I know of another mystery which I'm pledged not to speak about. I cannot help myself."

"Well, all I can say is, never be the heroine of a mystery that you can avoid, if you can't help being an accessary. Then, I suppose, I must yield to your wishes and let this scandal wear itself out without any notice from me?"

"What else can you do under the circumstances?"

"Ay; what else, indeed? How shall you bear it?"

For an instant the quick hot tears sprang into her eyes; to have everybody—all her world, thinking evil of her, did seem hard to the girl who had never thought or said an unkind thing of them. But she smiled as she made answer—

"It's like tooth-drawing, it will be over some time. It would be much worse if I really had been doing wrong."

"Cynthia shall beware—" he began; but Molly put her hand before his mouth.

"Papa, Cynthia must not be accused, or suspected; you will drive her out of your house if you do, she is so proud, and so unprotected, except by you. And Roger,—for Roger's sake, you will never do or say anything to send Cynthia away, when he has trusted us all to take care of her, and love her in his absence. Oh! I think if she were really wicked, and I did not love her at all, I should feel bound to watch over her, he loves her so dearly. And she is really good at heart, and I do love her dearly. You must not vex or hurt Cynthia, papa,—remember she is dependent upon you!"

"I think the world would get on tolerably well, if there were no women in it. They plague the life out of one. You've made me forget, amongst you—poor old Job Houghton that I ought to have gone to see an hour ago."

Molly put up her mouth to be kissed. "You're not angry with me now, papa, are you?"

"Get out of my way" (kissing her all the same). "If I'm not angry with you, I ought to be; for you've caused a great deal of worry, which won't be over yet awhile, I can tell you."

For all Molly's bravery at the time of this conversation, it was she that suffered more than her father. He kept out of the way of hearing gossip; but she was perpetually thrown into the small society of the place. Mrs. Gibson herself had caught cold, and moreover was not tempted by the quiet old-fashioned visiting which was going on just about this time, provoked by the visit of two of Mrs. Dawes' pretty unrefined nieces, who laughed, and chattered,

and ate, and would fain have flirted with Mr. Ashton, the vicar, could he have been brought by any possibility to understand his share in the business. Mr. Preston did not accept the invitations to Hollingford tea-drinkings with the same eager gratitude as he had done a year before : or else the shadow which hung over Molly would not have extended to him, her co-partner in the clandestine meetings which gave such umbrage to the feminine virtue of the town. Molly herself was invited, because it would not do to pass any apparent slight on either Mr. or Mrs. Gibson; but there was a tacit and underhand protest against her being received on the old terms. Every one was civil to her, but no one was cordial; there was a very perceptible film of difference in their behaviour to her from what it was formerly; nothing that had outlines and could be defined. But Molly, for all her clear conscience and her brave heart, felt acutely that she was only tolerated, not welcomed. She caught the buzzing whispers of the two Miss Oakes's, who, when they first met the heroine of the prevailing scandal, looked at her askance, and criticised her pretensions to good looks, with hardly an attempt at under-tones. Molly tried to be thankful that her father was not in the mood for visiting. She was even glad that her stepmother was too much of an invalid to come out, when she felt thus slighted, and as it were, degraded from her place. Miss Browning herself, that true old friend, spoke to her with chilling dignity, and much reserve; for she had never heard a word from Mr. Gibson since the evening when she had put herself to so much pain to tell him of the disagreeable rumours affecting his daughter.

Only Miss Phœbe would seek out Molly with even more than her former tenderness ; and this tried Molly's calmness more than all the slights put together. The soft hand, pressing hers under the table,—the continual appeals to her, so as to bring her back into the conversation, touched Molly almost to shedding tears. Sometimes the poor girl wondered to herself whether this change in the behaviour of her acquaintances was not a mere fancy of hers; whether, if she had never had that conversation with her father, in which she had borne herself so bravely at the time, she should have discovered the difference in their treatment of her. She never told her father how she felt these perpetual small slights: she had chosen to bear the burden of her own free will; nay, more, she had insisted on being allowed to do so; and it was not for her to grieve

him now by showing that she shrank from the consequences of her own act. So she never even made an excuse for not going into the small gaieties, or mingling with the society of Hollingford. Only she suddenly let go the stretch of restraint she was living in, when one evening her father told her that he was really anxious about Mrs. Gibson's cough, and should like Molly to give up a party at Mrs. Goodenough's, to which they were all three invited, but to which Molly alone was going. Molly's heart leaped up at the thoughts of stopping at home, even though the next moment she had to blame herself for rejoicing at a reprieve that was purchased by another's suffering. However, the remedies prescribed by her husband did Mrs. Gibson good; and she was particularly grateful and caressing to Molly.

"Really, dear!" said she, stroking Molly's head, "I think your hair is getting softer, and losing that disagreeable crisp curly feeling."

Then Molly knew that her stepmother was in high good-humour; the smoothness or curliness of her hair was a sure test of the favour in which Mrs. Gibson held her at the moment.

"I am so sorry to be the cause of detaining you from this little party, but dear papa is so over-anxious about me. I have always been a kind of pet with gentlemen, and poor Mr. Kirkpatrick never knew how to make enough of me. But I think Mr. Gibson is even more foolishly fond: his last words were, 'Take care of yourself, Hyacinth;' and then he came back again to say, 'If you don't attend to my directions I won't answer for the consequences.' I shook my forefinger at him, and said, 'Don't be so anxious, you silly man.'"

"I hope we have done everything he told us to do," said Molly.

"Oh yes! I feel so much better. Do you know, late as it is, I think you might go to Mrs. Goodenough's yet? Maria could take you, and I should like to see you dressed; when one has been wearing dull warm gowns for a week or two one gets quite a craving for bright colours, and evening dress. So go and get ready, dear, and then perhaps you'll bring me back some news, for really, shut up as I have been with only papa and you for the last fortnight, I've got quite moped and dismal, and I can't bear to keep young people from the gaieties suitable to their age."

"Oh, pray, mamma! I had so much rather not go!"

"Very well! very well! Only I think it is rather selfish of

you, when you see I am so willing to make the sacrifice for your sake."

"But you say it is a sacrifice to you, and I don't want to go."

"Very well; did I not say you might stop at home? only pray don't chop logic; nothing is so fatiguing to a sick person."

Then they were silent for some time. Mrs. Gibson broke the silence by saying, in a languid voice—

"Can't you think of anything amusing to say, Molly?"

Molly pumped up from the depths of her mind a few little trivialities which she had nearly forgotten, but she felt that they were anything but amusing, and so Mrs. Gibson seemed to feel them; for presently she said—

"I wish Cynthia was at home." And Molly felt it as a reproach to her own dulness.

"Shall I write to her and ask her to come back?"

"Well, I'm not sure; I wish I knew a great many things. You've not heard anything of poor dear Osborne Hamley lately, have you?"

Remembering her father's charge not to speak of Osborne's health, Molly made no reply, nor was any needed, for Mrs. Gibson went on thinking aloud—

"You see, if Mr. Henderson has been as attentive as he was in the spring—and the chances about Roger—I shall be really grieved if anything happens to that young man, uncouth as he is, but it must be owned that Africa is not merely an unhealthy—it is a savage—and even in some parts a cannibal country. I often think of all I've read of it in geography books, as I lie awake at night, and if Mr. Henderson is really becoming attached! The future is hidden from us by infinite wisdom, Molly, or else I should like to know it; one would calculate one's behaviour at the present time so much better if one only knew what events were to come. But I think, on the whole, we had better not alarm Cynthia. If we had only known in time we might have planned for her to have come down with Lord Cumnor and my lady."

"Are they coming? Is Lady Cumnor well enough to travel?"

"Yes, to be sure. Or else I should not have considered whether or no Cynthia could have come down with them; it would have sounded very well—more than respectable, and would have given her a position among that lawyer set in London."

"Then Lady Cumnor is better?"

"To be sure. I should have thought papa would have mentioned it to you; but, to be sure, he is always so scrupulously careful not to speak about his patients. Quite right too—quite right and delicate. Why, he hardly ever tells me how they are going on. Yes! the Earl and the Countess, and Lady Harriet and Lord and Lady Cuxhaven, and Lady Agnes; and I've ordered a new winter bonnet and a black satin cloak."

CHAPTER XX.

MOLLY GIBSON FINDS A CHAMPION.

Lady Cumnor had so far recovered from the violence of her attack, and from the consequent operation, as to be able to be removed to the Towers for change of air; and accordingly she was brought thither by her whole family with all the pomp and state becoming an invalid peeress. There was every probability that "the family" would make a longer residence at the Towers than they had done for several years, during which time they had been wanderers hither and thither in search of health. Somehow, after all, it was very pleasant and restful to come to the old ancestral home, and every member of the family enjoyed it in his or her own way; Lord Cumnor most especially. His talent for gossip and his love of small details had scarcely fair play in the hurry of a London life, and were much nipped in the bud during his Continental sojournings, as he neither spoke French fluently, nor understood it easily when spoken. Besides, he was a great proprietor, and liked to know how his land was going on; how his tenants were faring in the world. He liked to hear of their births, marriages, and deaths, and had something of a royal memory for faces. In short, if ever a peer was an old woman, Lord Cumnor was that peer; but he was a very good-natured old woman, and rode about on his stout old cob with his pockets full of halfpence for the children, and little packets of snuff for the old people. Like an old woman, too, he enjoyed an afternoon cup of tea in his wife's sitting-room, and over his gossip's beverage he would repeat all that he had learnt in the day. Lady Cumnor was exactly in that state of convalescence when such talk as her lord's was extremely agreeable to her, but she had contemned the habit of listening to gossip so severely all her life, that she thought it due to consistency to listen first, and enter a supercilious

protest afterwards. It had, however, come to be a family habit for all of them to gather together in Lady Cumnor's room on their return from their daily walks or drives, or rides, and over the fire, sipping their tea at her early meal, to recount the morsels of local intelligence they had heard during the morning. When they had said all that they had to say (and not before), they had always to listen to a short homily from her ladyship on the well-worn texts,—the poorness of conversation about persons,—the probable falsehood of all they had heard, and the degradation of character implied by its repetition. On one of these November evenings they were all assembled in Lady Cumnor's room. She was lying,—all draped in white, and covered up with an Indian shawl,—on a sofa near the fire. Lady Harriet sate on the rug, close before the wood-fire, picking up fallen embers with a pair of dwarf tongs, and piling them on the red and odorous heap in the centre of the hearth. Lady Cuxhaven, notable from girlhood, was using the blind man's holiday to net fruit-nets for the walls at Cuxhaven Park. Lady Cumnor's woman was trying to see to pour out tea by the light of one small wax-candle in the background (for Lady Cumnor could not bear much light to her weakened eyes); and the great leafless branches of the trees outside the house kept sweeping against the windows, moved by the wind that was gathering.

It was always Lady Cumnor's habit to snub those she loved best. Her husband was perpetually snubbed by her, yet she missed him now that he was later than usual, and professed not to want her tea; but they all knew that it was only because he was not there to hand it to her, and be found fault with for his invariable stupidity in forgetting that she liked to put sugar in before she took any cream. At length he burst in:—

"I beg your pardon, my lady,—I'm later than I should have been, I know. Why! haven't you had your tea yet?" he exclaimed, bustling about to get the cup for his wife.

"You know I never take cream before I've sweetened it," said she, with even more emphasis on the "never" than usual.

"To be sure! What a simpleton I am! I think I might have remembered it by this time. You see I met old Sheepshanks, and that's the reason of it."

"Of your handing me the cream before the sugar?" asked his wife. It was one of her grim jokes.

". No, no! ha, ha! You're better this evening, I think, my

dear. But, as I was saying, Sheepshanks is such an eternal talker, there's no getting away from him, and I had no idea it was so late!"

"Well, I think the least you can do is to tell us something of Mr. Sheepshanks' conversation now you have torn yourself away from him."

"Conversation! did I call it conversation? I don't think I said much. I listened. He really has always a great deal to say. More than Preston, for instance. And, by the way, he was telling me something about Preston;—old Sheepshanks thinks he'll be married before long,—he says there's a great deal of gossip going on about him and Gibson's daughter. They've been caught meeting in the park, and corresponding, and all that kind of thing that is likely to end in a marriage."

"I shall be very sorry," said Lady Harriet. "I always liked that girl; and I can't bear papa's model land-agent."

"I daresay it's not true," said Lady Cumnor, in a very audible aside to Lady Harriet. "Papa picks up stories one day to contradict them the next."

"Ah, but this did sound like truth. Sheepshanks said all the old ladies in the town had got hold of it, and were making a great scandal out of it."

"I don't think it does sound quite a nice story. I wonder what Clare could be doing to allow such goings on," said Lady Cuxhaven.

"I think it's much more likely that Clare's own daughter—that pretty pawky Miss Kirkpatrick—is the real heroine of this story," said Lady Harriet. "She always looks like a heroine of genteel comedy; and those young ladies were capable of a good deal of innocent intriguing, if I remember rightly. Now little Molly Gibson has a certain *gaucherie* about her which would disqualify her at once from any clandestine proceedings. Besides, 'clandestine!' why, the child is truth itself. Papa, are you sure Mr. Sheepshanks said it was Miss Gibson that was exciting Hollingford scandal? Wasn't it Miss Kirkpatrick? The notion of her and Mr. Preston making a match of it doesn't sound so incongruous; but if it's my little friend Molly, I'll go to church and forbid the banns."

"Really, Harriet, I can't think what always makes you take such an interest in all these petty Hollingford affairs."

"Mamma, it's only tit for tat. They take the most lively interest in all our sayings and doings. If I were going to be married, they would want to know every possible particular,—when we first met, what we first said to each other, what I wore, and whether he offered by letter or in person. I'm sure those good Miss Brownings were wonderfully well-informed as to Mary's methods of managing her nursery, and educating her girls; so it's only a proper return of the compliment to want to know on our side how they are going on. I'm quite of papa's faction. I like to hear all the local gossip."

"Especially when it is flavoured with a spice of scandal and impropriety, as in this case," said Lady Cumnor, with the momentary bitterness of a convalescent invalid. Lady Harriet coloured with annoyance. But then she rallied her courage, and said with more gravity than before,—

"I am really interested in this story about Molly Gibson, I own. I both like and respect her; and I do not like to hear her name coupled with that of Mr. Preston. I can't help fancying papa has made some mistake."

"No, my dear. I'm sure I'm repeating what I heard. I'm sorry I said anything about it, if it annoys you or my lady there. Sheepshanks did say Miss Gibson, though, and he went on to say it was a pity the girl had got herself so talked about; for it was the way they had carried on that gave rise to all the chatter. Preston himself was a very fair match for her, and nobody could have objected to it. But I'll try and find a more agreeable piece of news. Old Margery at the lodge is dead; and they don't know where to find some one to teach clear-starching at your school; and Robert Hall made forty pounds last year by his apples." So they drifted away from Molly and her affairs; only Lady Harriet kept turning what she had heard over in her own mind with interest and wonder.

"I warned her against him the day of her father's wedding. And what a straightforward, out-spoken topic it was then! I don't believe it; it's only one of old Sheepshanks' stories, half invention and half deafness."

The next day Lady Harriet rode over to Hollingford, and for the settling of her curiosity she called on Miss Brownings, and introduced the subject. She would not have spoken about the rumour she had heard to any who were not warm friends of Molly's. If Mr. Sheepshanks had chosen to allude to it when she

had been riding with her father, she could very soon have silenced him by one of the haughty looks she knew full well how to assume. But she felt as if she must know the truth, and accordingly she began thus abruptly to Miss Browning.

"What is all this I hear about my little friend Molly Gibson and Mr. Preston?"

"Oh, Lady Harriet! have you heard of it? We are so sorry!"

"Sorry for what?"

"I think, begging your ladyship's pardon, we had better not say any more till we know how much you know," said Miss Browning.

"Nay," replied Lady Harriet, laughing a little, "I shan't tell what I know till I am sure you know more. Then we'll make an exchange if you like."

"I'm afraid it's no laughing matter for poor Molly," said Miss Browning, shaking her head. "People do say such things!"

"But I don't believe them; indeed I don't," burst in Miss Phœbe, half crying.

"No more will I then," said Lady Harriet, taking the good lady's hand.

"It's all very fine, Phœbe, saying you don't believe them, but I should like to know who it was that convinced me, sadly against my will, I am sure."

"I only told you the facts as Mrs. Goodenough told them me, sister; but I'm sure if you had seen poor patient Molly as I have done, sitting up in a corner of a room, looking at the *Beauties of England and Wales* till she must have been sick of them, and no one speaking to her; and she as gentle and sweet as ever at the end of the evening, though maybe a bit pale—facts or no facts, I won't believe anything against her."

So there sate Miss Phœbe, in tearful defiance of facts.

"And, as I said before, I'm quite of your opinion," said Lady Harriet.

"But how does your ladyship explain away her meetings with Mr. Preston in all sorts of unlikely and open-air places?" asked Miss Browning,—who, to do her justice, would have been only too glad to join Molly's partisans, if she could have preserved her character for logical deduction at the same time. "I went so far as to send for her father and tell him all about it. I thought at

least he would have horsewhipped Mr. Preston ; but he seems to have taken no notice of it."

"Then we may be quite sure he knows some way of explaining matters that we don't," said Lady Harriet, decisively. "After all, there may be a hundred and fifty perfectly natural and justifiable explanations."

"Mr. Gibson knew of none when I thought it my duty to speak to him," said Miss Browning.

"Why, suppose that Mr. Preston is engaged to Miss Kirkpatrick, and Molly is confidante and messenger?"

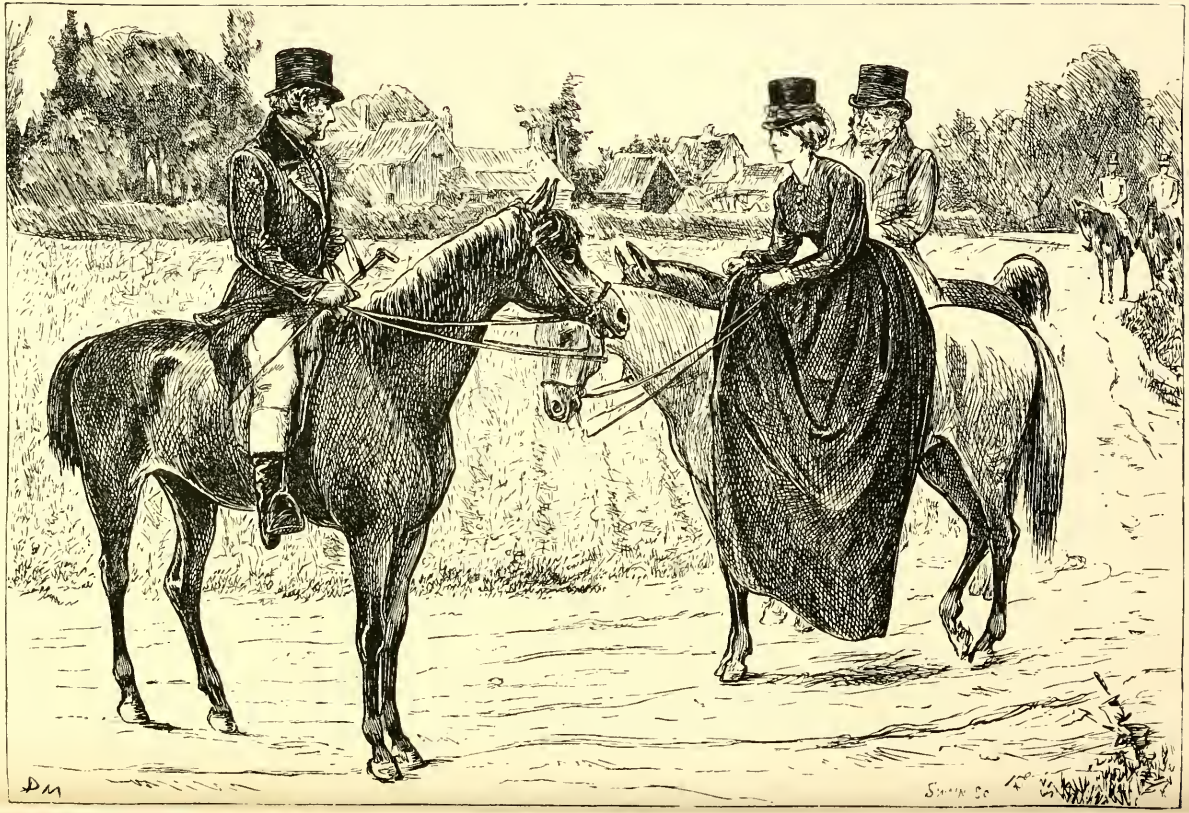
"I don't see that your ladyship's supposition much alters the blame. Why, if he is honourably engaged to Cynthia Kirkpatrick, does he not visit her openly at her home in Mr. Gibson's house? Why does Molly lend herself to clandestine proceedings?"

"One can't account for everything," said Lady Harriet, a little impatiently, for reason was going hard against her. "But I choose to have faith in Molly Gibson. I'm sure she's not done anything very wrong. I've a great mind to go and call on her—Mrs. Gibson is confined to her room with this horrid influenza—and take her with me on a round of calls through the little gossiping town,—on Mrs. Goodenough, or Badenough, who seems to have been propagating all these stories. But I've not time to-day. I've to meet papa at three, and it's three now. Only remember, Miss Phœbe, it's you and I against the world, in defence of a distressed damsel."

"Don Quixote and Sancho Panza?" said she to herself as she ran lightly down Miss Browning's old-fashioned staircase.

"Now, I don't think that's pretty of you, Phœbe," said Miss Browning in some displeasure, as soon as she was alone with her sister. "First, you convince me against my will, and make me very unhappy; and I have to do unpleasant things, all because you've made me believe that certain statements are true ; and then you turn round and cry, and say you don't believe a word of it all, making me out a regular ogre and backbiter. No ! it's of no use. I shan't listen to you." So she left Miss Phœbe in tears, and locked herself up in her own room.

Lady Harriet, meanwhile, was riding homewards by her father's side, apparently listening to all he chose to say, but in reality turning over the probabilities and possibilities that might account for these strange interviews between Molly and Mr. Preston. It was a case of *parler de l'âne et l'on en voit les oreilles.* At a turn in the road



they saw Mr. Preston a little way before them, coming towards them on his good horse, *point device*, in his riding attire.

The earl, in his thread-bare coat, and on his old brown cob, called out cheerfully,—

"Aha! here's Preston. Good-day to you. I was just wanting to ask you about that slip of pasture-land on the Home Farm. John Brickkill wants to plough it up and crop it. It's not two acres at the best."

While they were talking over this bit of land, Lady Harriet came to her resolution. As soon as her father had finished, she said,—

"Mr. Preston, perhaps you will allow me to ask you one or two questions to relieve my mind, for I am in some little perplexity at present."

"Certainly; I shall only be too happy to give you any information in my power." But the moment after he had made this polite speech, he recollected Molly's speech—that she would refer her case to Lady Harriet. But the letters had been returned, and the affair was now wound up. She had come off conqueror, he the vanquished. Surely she would never have been so ungenerous as to appeal after that.

"There are reports about Miss Gibson and you current among the gossips of Hollingford. Are we to congratulate you on your engagement to that young lady?"

"Ah! by the way, Preston, we ought to have done it before," interrupted Lord Cumnor, in hasty goodwill. But his daughter said quietly, "Mr. Preston has not yet told us if the reports are well founded, papa."

She looked at him with the air of a person expecting an answer, and expecting a truthful answer.

"I am not so fortunate," replied he, trying to make his horse appear fidgety, without incurring observation.

"Then I may contradict that report?" asked Lady Harriet quickly. "Or is there any reason for believing that in time it may come true? I ask because such reports, if unfounded, do harm to young ladies."

"Keep other sweethearts off," put in Lord Cumnor, looking a good deal pleased at his own discernment. Lady Harriet went on:—

"And I take a great interest in Miss Gibson."

Mr. Preston saw from her manner that he was "in for it," as he expressed it to himself. The question was, how much or how little did she know?

"I have no expectation or hope of ever having a nearer interest in Miss Gibson than I have at present. I shall be glad if this straightforward answer relieves your ladyship from your perplexity."

He could not help the touch of insolence that accompanied these last words. It was not in the words themselves, nor in the tone in which they were spoken, nor in the look which accompanied them, it was in all; it implied a doubt of Lady Harriet's right to question him as she did; and there was something of defiance in it as well. But this touch of insolence put Lady Harriet's mettle up; and she was not one to check herself, in any course, for the opinion of an inferior.

"Then, sir! are you aware of the injury you may do to a young lady's reputation if you meet her, and detain her in long conversations, when she is walking by herself, unaccompanied by any one? You give rise—you have given rise to reports."

"My dear Harriet, are not you going too far? You don't know—Mr. Preston may have intentions—acknowledged intentions."

"No, my lord. I have no intentions with regard to Miss Gibson. She may be a very worthy young lady—I have no doubt she is. Lady Harriet seems determined to push me into such a position that I cannot but acknowledge myself to be—it is not enviable—not pleasant to own—but I am, in fact, a jilted man; jilted by Miss Kirkpatrick, after a tolerably long engagement. My interviews with Miss Gibson were not of the most agreeable kind—as you may conclude when I tell you she was, I believe the instigator—certainly, she was the agent in this last step of Miss Kirkpatrick's. Is your ladyship's curiosity" (with an emphasis on this last word) "satisfied with this rather mortifying confession of mine?"

"Harriet, my dear, you've gone too far—we had no right to pry into Mr. Preston's private affairs."

"No more I had," said Lady Harriet, with a smile of winning frankness: the first smile she had accorded to Mr. Preston for many a long day; ever since the time, years ago, when, presuming on his handsomeness, he had assumed a tone of gallant familiarity with Lady Harriet, and paid her personal compliments as he would have done to an equal.

"But he will excuse me, I hope," continued she, still in that

gracious manner which made him feel that he now held a much higher place in her esteem than he had had at the beginning of their interview, "when he learns that the busy tongues of the Hollingford ladies have been speaking of my friend, Miss Gibson, in the most unwarrantable manner; drawing unjustifiable inferences from the facts of that intercourse with Mr. Preston, the nature of which he has just conferred such a real obligation on me by explaining."

"I think I need hardly request Lady Harriet to consider this explanation of mine as confidential," said Mr. Preston.

"Of course, of course!" said the earl; "every one will understand that." And he rode home, and told his wife and Lady Cuxhaven the whole conversation between Lady Harriet and Mr. Preston; in the strictest confidence, of course. Lady Harriet had to stand a good many strictures on manners, and proper dignity for a few days after this. However, she consoled herself by calling on the Gibsons; and, finding that Mrs. Gibson (who was still an invalid) was asleep at the time, she experienced no difficulty in carrying off the unconscious Molly for a walk, which Lady Harriet so contrived that they twice passed through all the length of the principal street of the town, loitered at Grinstead's for half an hour, and wound up by Lady Harriet's calling on the Miss Brownings, who, to her regret, were not at home.

"Perhaps, it's as well," said she, after a minute's consideration. "I'll leave my card, and put your name down underneath it, Molly."

Molly was a little puzzled by the manner in which she had been taken possession of, like an inanimate chattel, for all the afternoon, and exclaimed,—

"Please, Lady Harriet—I never leave cards; I have not got any, and on the Miss Brownings, of all people; why, I am in and out whenever I like."

"Never mind, little one. To-day you shall do everything properly, and according to full etiquette."

"And now tell Mrs. Gibson to come out to the Towers for a long day; we will send the carriage for her whenever she will let us know that she is strong enough to come. Indeed, she had better come for a few days; at this time of the year it doesn't do for an invalid to be out in the evenings, even in a carriage." So spoke Lady Harriet, standing on the white door-steps at Miss Brownings', and holding Molly's hand while she wished her good-by. "You'll

tell her, dear, that I came partly to see her—but that finding her asleep, I ran off with you, and don't forget about her coming to stay with us for change of air—mamma will like it, I'm sure—and the carriage, and all that. And now good-by, we've done a good day's work! And better than you're aware of," continued she, still addressing Molly, though the latter was quite out of hearing.

"Hollingford is not the place I take it to be, if it doesn't veer round in Miss Gibson's favour after my to-day's trotting of that child about."

CHAPTER XXI.

CYNTHIA AT BAY.

Mrs. Gibson was slow in recovering her strength after the influenza, and before she was well enough to accept Lady Harriet's invitation to the Towers, Cynthia came home from London. If Molly had thought her manner of departure was scarcely as affectionate and considerate as it might have been,—if such a thought had crossed Molly's fancy for an instant, she was repentant for it as soon as ever Cynthia returned, and the girls met together face to face, with all the old familiar affection, going upstairs to the drawing-room, with their arms round each other's waists, and sitting there together hand in hand. Cynthia's whole manner was more quiet than it had been, when the weight of her unpleasant secret rested on her mind, and made her alternately despondent or flighty.

"After all," said Cynthia, "there's a look of home about these rooms which is very pleasant. But I wish I could see you looking stronger, mamma! that's the only unpleasant thing. Molly, why didn't you send for me?"

"I wanted to do," began Molly.

"But I wouldn't let her," said Mrs. Gibson. "You were much better in London than here, for you could have done me no good; and your letters were very agreeable to read; and now Helen is better, and I'm nearly well, and you've come home just at the right time, for everybody is full of the Charity Ball."

"But we are not going this year, mamma," said Cynthia decidedly. "It's on the 25th, isn't it? and I'm sure you'll never be well enough to take us."

"You really seem determined to make me out worse than I am, child," said Mrs. Gibson, rather querulously, she being one of those who, when their malady is only trifling, exaggerate it, but when it is really of some consequence, are unwilling to sacrifice any plea-

sures by acknowledging it. It was well for her in this instance that her husband had wisdom and authority enough to forbid her going to this ball, on which she had set her heart; but the consequence of his prohibition was an increase of domestic plaintiveness and low spirits, which seemed to tell on Cynthia—the bright gay Cynthia herself—and it was often hard work for Molly to keep up the spirits of two other people as well as her own. Ill-health might account for Mrs. Gibson's despondency, but why was Cynthia so silent, not to say so sighing? Molly was puzzled to account for it; and all the more perplexed because from time to time Cynthia kept calling upon her for praise for some unknown and mysterious virtue that she had practised; and Molly was young enough to believe that, after any exercise of virtue, the spirits rose, cheered up by an approving conscience. Such was not the case with Cynthia, however. She sometimes said such things as these, when she had been particularly inert and desponding:—

"Ah, Molly, you must let my goodness lie fallow for a while! It has borne such a wonderful crop this year. I have been so pretty-behaved—if you knew all!" Or, "Really, Molly, my virtue must come down from the clouds! It was strained to the utmost in London—and I find it is like a kite—after soaring aloft for some time, it suddenly comes down, and gets tangled in all sorts of briars and brambles; which things are an allegory, unless you can bring yourself to believe in my extraordinary goodness while I was away—giving me a sort of right to fall foul of all mamma's briars and brambles now."

But Molly had had some experience of Cynthia's whim of perpetually hinting at a mystery which she did not mean to reveal in the Mr. Preston days, and, although she was occasionally piqued into curiosity, Cynthia's allusions at something more in the background fell in general on rather deaf ears. One day the mystery burst its shell, and came out in the shape of an offer made to Cynthia by Mr. Henderson—and refused. Under all the circumstances, Molly could not appreciate the heroic goodness so often alluded to. The revelation of the secret at last took place in this way. Mrs. Gibson breakfasted in bed: she had done so ever since she had had the influenza; and, consequently, her own private letters always went up on her breakfast-tray. One morning she came into the drawing-room earlier than usual, with an open letter in her hand.

"I've had a letter from aunt Kirkpatrick, Cynthia. She sends me my dividends,—your uncle is so busy. But what does she mean by this, Cynthia?" (holding out the letter to her, with a certain paragraph indicated by her finger). Cynthia put her netting on one side, and looked at the writing. Suddenly her face turned scarlet, and then became of a deadly white. She looked at Molly, as if to gain courage from the strong serene countenance.

"It means—mamma, I may as well tell you at once—Mr. Henderson offered to me while I was in London, and I refused him."

"Refused him—and you never told me, but let me hear it by chance! Really, Cynthia, I think you're very unkind. And pray what made you refuse Mr. Henderson? Such a fine young man,—and such a gentleman! Your uncle told me he had a very good private fortune besides."

"Mamma, do you forget that I have promised to marry Roger Hamley?" said Cynthia quietly.

"No! of course I don't—how can I, with Molly always dinning the word 'engagement' into my ears? But really, when one considers all the uncertainties,—and after all it was not a distinct promise,—he seemed almost as if he might have looked forward to something of this sort."

"Of what sort, mamma?" said Cynthia, sharply.

"Why, of a more eligible offer. He must have known you might change your mind, and meet with some one you liked better: so little as you had seen of the world." Cynthia made an impatient movement, as if to stop her mother.

"I never said I liked him better,—how can you talk so, mamma? I'm going to marry Roger, and there's an end of it. I will not be spoken to about it again." She got up and left the room.

"Going to marry Roger! That's all very fine. But who is to guarantee his coming back alive! And if he does, what have they to marry upon, I should like to know? I don't wish her to have accepted Mr. Henderson, though I am sure she liked him; and true love ought to have its course, and not be thwarted; but she need not have quite finally refused him until—well, until we had seen how matters turn out. Such an invalid as I am too! It has given me quite a palpitation at the heart. I do call it quite unfeeling of Cynthia."

"Certainly,—" began Molly; but then she remembered that her stepmother was far from strong, and unable to bear a protest

in favour of the right course without irritation. So she changed her speech into a suggestion of remedies for palpitation; and curbed her impatience to speak out her indignation at the contemplated falsehood to Roger. But when they were alone, and Cynthia began upon the subject, Molly was less merciful. Cynthia said,—

"Well, Molly, and now you know all! I've been longing to tell you—and yet somehow I could not."

"I suppose it was a repetition of Mr. Coxe?" said Molly, gravely. "You were agreeable,—and he took it for something more."

"I don't know," sighed Cynthia. "I mean I don't know if I was agreeable or not. He was very kind—very pleasant—but I didn't expect it all to end as it did. However, it's of no use thinking of it."

"No!" said Molly, simply; for to her mind the pleasantest and kindest person in the world put in comparison with Roger was as nothing; he stood by himself. Cynthia's next words,—and they did not come very soon,—were on quite a different subject, and spoken in rather a pettish tone. Nor did she allude again in jesting sadness to her late efforts at virtue.

In a little while Mrs. Gibson was able to accept the often-repeated invitation from the Towers to go and stay there for a day or two. Lady Harriet told her that it would be a kindness to Lady Cumnor to come and bear her company in the life of seclusion the latter was still compelled to lead; and Mrs. Gibson was flattered and gratified with a dim unconscious sense of being really wanted, not merely deluding herself into a pleasing fiction. Lady Cumnor was in that state of convalescence common to many invalids. The spring of life had begun again to flow, and with the flow returned the old desires and projects and plans, which had all become mere matters of indifference during the worst part of her illness. But as yet her bodily strength was not sufficient to be an agent to her energetic mind, and the difficulty of driving the ill-matched pair of body and will—the one weak and languid, the other strong and stern,—made her ladyship often very irritable. Mrs. Gibson herself was not quite strong enough for a "*souffre-douleur;*" and the visit to the Towers was not, on the whole, quite so happy a one as she had anticipated. Lady Cuxhaven and Lady Harriet, each aware of their mother's state of health and temper, but only alluding to it as slightly as was absolutely necessary in their conversations with each other, took care not to leave "Clare" too long

with Lady Cumnor; but several times when one or the other went to relieve guard they found Clare in tears, and Lady Cumnor holding forth on some point on which she had been meditating during the silent hours of her illness, and on which she seemed to consider herself born to set the world to rights. Mrs. Gibson was always apt to consider these remarks as addressed with a personal direction at some error of her own, and defended the fault in question with a sense of property in it, whatever it might happen to be. The second and the last day of her stay at the Towers, Lady Harriet came in, and found her mother haranguing in an excited tone of voice, and Clare looking submissive and miserable and oppressed.

"What's the matter, dear mamma? Are not you tiring yourself with talking?"

"No, not at all! I was only speaking of the folly of people dressing above their station. I began by telling Clare of the fashions of my grandmother's days, when every class had a sort of costume of its own,—and servants did not ape tradespeople, nor tradespeople professional men, and so on,—and what must the foolish woman do but begin to justify her own dress, as if I had been accusing her, or even thinking about her at all. Such nonsense! Really, Clare, your husband has spoilt you sadly, if you can't listen to any one without thinking they are alluding to you. People may flatter themselves just as much by thinking that their faults are always present to other people's minds, as if they believe that the world is always contemplating their individual charms and virtues."

"I was told, Lady Cumnor, that this silk was reduced in price. I bought it at Waterloo House after the season was over," said Mrs. Gibson, touching the very handsome gown she wore in deprecation of Lady Cumnor's angry voice, and blundering on to the very source of irritation.

"Again, Clare! How often must I tell you I had no thought of you or your gowns, or whether they cost much or little; your husband has to pay for them, and it is his concern if you spend more on your dress than you ought to do."

"It was only five guineas for the whole dress," pleaded Mrs. Gibson.

"And very pretty it is," said Lady Harriet, stooping to examine it, and so hoping to soothe the poor aggrieved woman. But Lady Cumnor went on.

"No! you ought to have known me better by this time. When I think a thing I say it out. I don't beat about the bush. I use straightforward language. I will tell you where I think you have been in fault, Clare, if you like to know." Like it or not, the plain-speaking was coming now. "You have spoilt that girl of yours till she does not know her own mind. She has behaved abominably to Mr. Preston; and it is all in consequence of the faults in her education. You have much to answer for."

"Mamma, mamma!" said Lady Harriet, "Mr. Preston did not wish it spoken about." And at the same moment Mrs. Gibson exclaimed, "Cynthia—Mr. Preston!" in such a tone of surprise, that if Lady Cumnor had been in the habit of observing the revelations made by other people's tones and voices, she would have found out that Mrs. Gibson was ignorant of the affair to which she was alluding.

"As for Mr. Preston's wishes, I do not suppose I am bound to regard them when I feel it my duty to reprove error," said Lady Cumnor loftily to Lady Harriet. "And, Clare, do you mean to say that you are not aware that your daughter has been engaged to Mr. Preston for some time—years, I believe,—and has at last chosen to break it off,—and has used the Gibson girl—I forget her name—as a cat's-paw, and made both her and herself the town's talk—the butt for all the gossip of Hollingford? I remember when I was young there was a girl called Jilting Jessy. You'll have to watch over your young lady, or she will get some such name. I speak to you like a friend, Clare, when I tell you it's my opinion that girl of yours will get herself into some more mischief yet before she's safely married. Not that I care one straw for Mr. Preston's feelings. I don't even know if he's got feelings or not; but I know what is becoming in a young woman, and jilting is not. And now you may both go away, and send Dawson to me, for I'm tired, and want to have a little sleep."

"Indeed, Lady Cumnor—will you believe me?—I do not think Cynthia was ever engaged to Mr. Preston. There was an old flirtation. I was afraid ——"

"Ring the bell for Dawson," said Lady Cumnor, wearily: her eyes closed. Lady Harriet had too much experience of her mother's moods not to lead Mrs. Gibson away almost by main force, she protesting all the while that she did not think there was any truth in the statement, though it was dear Lady Cumnor that said it.

Once in her own room, Lady Harriet said, "Now, Clare, I'll tell you all about it; and I think you'll have to believe it, for it was Mr. Preston himself who told me. I heard of a great commotion in Hollingford about Mr. Preston; and I met him riding out, and asked him what it was all about; he didn't want to speak about it, evidently. No man does, I suppose, when he's been jilted; and he made both papa and me promise not to tell; but papa did—and that's what mamma has for a foundation; you see, a really good one."

"But Cynthia is engaged to another man—she really is. And another—a very good match indeed—has just been offering to her in London. Mr. Preston is always at the root of mischief."

"Nay! I do think in this case it must be that pretty Miss Cynthia of yours who has drawn on one man to be engaged to her, —not to say two,—and another to make her an offer. I can't endure Mr. Preston, but I think it's rather hard to accuse him of having called up the rivals, who are I suppose the occasion of his being jilted."

"I don't know; I always feel as if he owed me a grudge, and men have so many ways of being spiteful. You must acknowledge that if he had not met you I should not have had dear Lady Cumnor so angry with me."

"She only wanted to warn you about Cynthia. Mamma has always been very particular about her own daughters. She has been very severe on the least approach to flirting, and Mary will be like her!"

"But Cynthia will flirt, and I can't help it. She is not noisy, or giggling; she is always a lady—that everybody must own. But she has a way of attracting men, she must have inherited from me, I think." And here she smiled faintly, and would not have rejected a confirmatory compliment, but none came. "However, I will speak to her; I will get to the bottom of the whole affair. Pray tell Lady Cumnor that it has so fluttered me the way she spoke, about my dress and all. And it only cost five guineas after all, reduced from eight!"

"Well, never mind now. You are looking very much flushed; quite feverish! I left you too long in mamma's hot room. But do you know she is so much pleased to have you here?" And so Lady Cumnor really was, in spite of the continual lectures which she gave "Clare," and which poor Mrs. Gibson turned under as helplessly as

the typical worm. Still it was something to have a countess to scold her; and that pleasure would endure when the worry was past. And then Lady Harriet petted her more than usual to make up for what she had to go through in the convalescent's room; and Lady Cuxhaven talked sense to her, with dashes of science and deep thought intermixed, which was very flattering, although generally unintelligible; and Lord Cumnor, good-natured, good-tempered, kind, and liberal, was full of gratitude to her for her kindness in coming to see Lady Cumnor, and his gratitude took the tangible shape of a haunch of venison, to say nothing of lesser game. When she looked back upon her visit, as she drove home in the solitary grandeur of the Towers' carriage, there had been but one great enduring rub—Lady Cumnor's crossness—and she chose to consider Cynthia as the cause of that, instead of seeing the truth, which had been so often set before her by the members of her ladyship's family, that it took its origin in her state of health. Mrs. Gibson did not exactly mean to visit this one discomfort upon Cynthia, nor did she quite mean to upbraid her daughter for conduct as yet unexplained, and which might have some justification; but, finding her quietly sitting in the drawing-room, she sate down despondingly in her own little easy chair, and in reply to Cynthia's quick pleasant greeting of—

"Well, mamma, how are you? We didn't expect you so early! Let me take off your bonnet and shawl!" she replied dolefully,—

"It has not been such a happy visit that I should wish to prolong it." Her eyes were fixed on the carpet, and her face was as irresponsive to the welcome offered as she could make it.

"What has been the matter?" asked Cynthia, in all good faith.

"You! Cynthia—you! I little thought when you were born how I should have to bear to hear you spoken about."

Cynthia threw back her head, and angry light came into her eyes.

"What business have they with me? How came they to talk about me in any way?"

"Everybody is talking about you; it is no wonder they are. Lord Cumnor is sure to hear about everything always. You should take more care about what you do, Cynthia, if you don't like being talked about."

"It rather depends upon what people say," said Cynthia, affecting a lightness which she did not feel; for she had a prevision of what was coming.

"Well! I don't like it, at any rate. It is not pleasant to me to hear first of my daughter's misdoings from Lady Cumnor, and then to be lectured about her, and her flirting, and her jilting, as if I had had anything to do with it. I can assure you it has quite spoilt my visit. No! don't touch my shawl. When I go to my room I can take it myself."

Cynthia was brought to bay, and sate down; remaining with her mother, who kept sighing ostentatiously from time to time.

"Would you mind telling me what they said? If there are accusations abroad against me, it is as well I should know what they are. Here's Molly" (as the girl entered the room, fresh from a morning's walk). "Molly, mamma has come back from the Towers, and my lord and my lady have been doing me the honour to talk over my crimes and misdemeanors, and I am asking mamma what they have said. I don't set up for more virtue than other people, but I can't make out what an earl and a countess have to do with poor little me."

"It was not for your sake!" said Mrs. Gibson. "It was for mine. They felt for me, for it is not pleasant to have one's child's name in everybody's mouth."

"As I said before, that depends upon how it is in everybody's mouth. If I were going to marry Lord Hollingford, I make no doubt every one would be talking about me, and neither you nor I should mind it in the least."

"But this is no marriage with Lord Hollingford, so it is nonsense to talk as if it was. They say you've gone and engaged yourself to Mr. Preston, and now refuse to marry him; and they call that jilting."

"Do you wish me to marry him, mamma?" asked Cynthia, her face in a flame, her eyes cast down. Molly stood by, very hot, not fully understanding it; and only kept where she was by the hope of coming in as sweetener or peacemaker, or helper of some kind.

"No," said Mrs. Gibson, evidently discomfited by the question. "Of course I don't; you've gone and entangled yourself with Roger Hamley, a very worthy young man; but nobody knows where he is, and if he's dead or alive; and he has not a penny if he is alive."

"I beg your pardon. I know that he has some fortune from his mother; it may not be much, but he is not penniless; and he is sure to earn fame and great reputation, and with it money will come," said Cynthia.

"You've entangled yourself with him, and you've done something of the sort with Mr. Preston, and got yourself into such an imbroglio" (Mrs. Gibson could not have said "mess" for the world, although the word was present to her mind), "that when a really eligible person comes forward—handsome, agreeable, and quite the gentleman—and a good private fortune into the bargain, you have to refuse him. You'll end as an old maid, Cynthia, and it will break my heart."

"I daresay I shall," said Cynthia, quietly. "I sometimes think I'm the kind of person of which old maids are made!" She spoke seriously, and a little sadly.

Mrs. Gibson began again. "I don't want to know your secrets as long as they are secrets; but when all the town is talking about you, I think I ought to be told."

"But, mamma, I didn't know I was such a subject of conversation; and even now I can't make out how it has come about."

"No more can I. I only know that they say you've been engaged to Mr. Preston, and ought to have married him, and that I can't help it, if you did not choose, any more than I could have helped your refusing Mr. Henderson; and yet I am constantly blamed for your misconduct. I think it's very hard." Mrs. Gibson began to cry. Just then her husband came in.

"You here, my dear! Welcome back," said he, coming up to her courteously, and kissing her cheek. "Why, what's the matter? Tears?" and he heartily wished himself away again.

"Yes!" said she, raising herself up, and clutching after sympathy of any kind, at any price. "I'm come home again, and I'm telling Cynthia how Lady Cumnor has been so cross to me, and all through her. Did you know she had gone and engaged herself to Mr. Preston, and then broken it off? Everybody is talking about it, and they know it up at the Towers."

For one moment his eyes met Molly's, and he comprehended it all. He made his lips up into a whistle, but no sound came. Cynthia had quite lost her defiant manner since her mother had spoken to Mr. Gibson. Molly sate down by her.

"Cynthia," said he, very seriously.

"Yes!" she answered, softly.

"Is this true? I had heard something of it before—not much; but there is scandal enough about to make it desirable that you should have some protector—some friend who knows the whole truth."

No answer. At last she said, "Molly knows it all."

Mrs. Gibson, too, had been awed into silence by her husband's grave manner, and she did not like to give vent to the jealous thought in her mind that Molly had known the secret of which she was ignorant. Mr. Gibson replied to Cynthia with some sternness:

"Yes! I know that Molly knows it all, and that she has had to bear slander and ill words for your sake, Cynthia. But she refused to tell me more."

"She told you that much, did she?" said Cynthia, aggrieved.

"I could not help it," said Molly.

"She didn't name your name," said Mr. Gibson. "At the time I believe she thought she had concealed it—but there was no mistaking who it was."

"Why did she speak about it at all?" said Cynthia, with some bitterness. Her tone—her question stirred up Mr. Gibson's passion.

"It was necessary for her to justify herself to me—I heard my daughter's reputation attacked for the private meetings she had given to Mr. Preston—I came to her for an explanation. There's no need to be ungenerous, Cynthia, because you've been a flirt and a jilt, even to the degree of dragging Molly's name down into the same mire."

Cynthia lifted her bowed-down head, and looked at him.

"You say that of me, Mr. Gibson. Not knowing what the circumstances are, you say that!"

He had spoken too strongly: he knew it. But he could not bring himself to own it just at that moment. The thought of his sweet innocent Molly, who had borne so much patiently, prevented any retractation of his words at the time.

"Yes!" he said, "I do say it. You cannot tell what evil constructions are put upon actions ever so slightly beyond the bounds of maidenly propriety. I do say that Molly has had a great deal to bear, in consequence of this clandestine engagement of yours, Cynthia—there may be extenuating circumstances, I acknowledge—but you will need to remember them all to excuse your conduct to Roger Hamley, when he comes home. I asked you to tell me the full truth, in order that until he comes, and has a legal right to protect you, I may do so." No answer. "It certainly requires explanation," continued he. "Here are you engaged to two men at once to all appearances!" Still no answer. "To be sure, the gossips of the town haven't yet picked out the fact of Roger Hamley's being

your accepted lover; but scandal has been resting on Molly, and ought to have rested on you, Cynthia—for a concealed engagement to Mr. Preston—necessitating meetings in all sorts of places unknown to your friends."

"Papa," said Molly, "if you knew all you wouldn't speak so to Cynthia. I wish she would tell you herself all that she has told me."

"I am ready to hear whatever she has to say," said he. But Cynthia said,—

"No! you have prejudged me; you have spoken to me as you had no right to speak. I refuse to give you my confidence, or accept your help. People are very cruel to me"—her voice trembled for a moment—"I did not think you would have been. But I can bear it."

And then, in spite of Molly, who could have detained her by force, she tore herself away, and hastily left the room.

"Oh, papa!" said Molly, crying, and clinging to him, "do let me tell you all." And then she suddenly recollected the awkwardness of telling some of the details of the story before Mrs. Gibson, and stopped short.

"I think, Mr. Gibson, you have been very very unkind to my poor fatherless child," said Mrs. Gibson, emerging from behind her pocket-handkerchief. "I only wish her poor father had been alive, and all this would never have happened."

"Very probably. Still I cannot see of what either she or you have to complain. Inasmuch as we could, I and mine have sheltered her! I have loved her; I do love her almost as if she were my own child—as well as Molly, I do not pretend to do."

"That's it, Mr. Gibson! you do not treat her like your own child." But in the midst of this wrangle Molly stole out, and went in search of Cynthia. She thought she bore an olive-branch of healing in the sound of her father's just spoken words: "I do love her almost as if she were my own child." But Cynthia was locked into her room, and refused to open the door.

"Open to me, please," pleaded Molly. "I have something to say to you—I want to see you—do open!"

"No!" said Cynthia. "Not now. I am busy. Leave me alone. I don't want to hear what you have got to say. I don't want to see you. By-and-by we shall meet, and then——" Molly stood quite quietly, wondering what new words of more persuasion she could use. In a minute or two Cynthia called out,

"Are you there still, Molly?" and when Molly answered "Yes," and hoped for a relenting, the same hard metallic voice, telling of resolution and repression, spoke out, "Go away. I cannot bear the feeling of your being there—waiting and listening. Go downstairs—out of the house—anywhere away. It is the most you can do for me now."

CHAPTER XXII.

"TROUBLES NEVER COME ALONE."

Molly had her out-of-door things on, and she crept away as she was bidden. She lifted her heavy weight of heart and body along till she came to a field, not so very far off,—where she had sought the comfort of loneliness ever since she was a child; and there, under the hedge-bank, she sate down, burying her face in her hands, and quivering all over as she thought of Cynthia's misery, which she might not try to touch or assuage. She never knew how long she sate there, but it was long past lunch-time when once again she stole up to her room. The door opposite was open wide,—Cynthia had quitted the chamber. Molly arranged her dress and went down into the drawing-room. Cynthia and her mother sate there in the stern repose of an armed neutrality. Cynthia's face looked made of stone, for colour and rigidity; but she was netting away as if nothing unusual had occurred. Not so Mrs. Gibson; her face bore evident marks of tears, and she looked up and greeted Molly's entrance with a faint smiling notice. Cynthia went on as though she had never heard the opening of the door, or felt the approaching sweep of Molly's dress. Molly took up a book,—not to read, but to have the semblance of some employment which should not necessitate conversation.

There was no measuring the duration of the silence that ensued. Molly grew to fancy it was some old enchantment that weighed upon their tongues and kept them still. At length Cynthia spoke, but she had to begin again before her words came clear.

"I wish you both to know that henceforward all is at an end between me and Roger Hamley."

Molly's book went down upon her knees; with open eyes and lips she strove to draw in Cynthia's meaning. Mrs. Gibson spoke querulously, as if injured.

"I could have understood this if it had happened three months ago,—when you were in London; but now it's just nonsense, Cynthia, and you know you don't mean it!"

Cynthia did not reply; nor did the resolute look on her face change when Molly spoke at last.

"Cynthia—think of him! It will break his heart!"

"No!" said Cynthia, "it will not. But even if it did I cannot help it."

"All this talk will soon pass away!" said Molly! "and when he knows the truth from your own self——"

"From my own self he shall never hear it. I do not love him well enough to go through the shame of having to excuse myself,—to plead that he will reinstate me in his good opinion. Confession may be—well! I can never believe it pleasant—but it may be an ease of mind if one makes it to some people,—to some person,—and it may not be a mortification to sue for forgiveness. I cannot tell. All I know is,—and I know it clearly, and will act upon it inflexibly—that——" And here she stopped short.

"I think you might finish your sentence," said her mother, after a silence of five seconds.

"I cannot bear to exculpate myself to Roger Hamley. I will not submit to his thinking less well of me than he has done,—however foolish his judgment may have been. I would rather never see him again, for these two reasons. And the truth is, I do not love him. I like him, I respect him; but I will not marry him. I have written to tell him so. That was merely as a relief to myself, for when or where the letter will reach him—— And I have written to old Mr. Hamley. The relief is the one good thing come out of it all. It is such a comfort to feel free again. It wearied me so to think of straining up to his goodness. 'Extenuate my conduct!'" she concluded, quoting Mr. Gibson's words. Yet when Mr. Gibson came home, after a silent dinner, she asked to speak with him, alone, in his consulting-room; and there laid bare the exculpation of herself which she had given to Molly many weeks before. When she had ended, she said:

"And now, Mr. Gibson,—I still treat you like a friend,—help me to find some home far away, where all the evil talking and gossip mamma tells me of cannot find me and follow me. It may be wrong to care for people's good opinion,—but it is me, and I cannot alter myself. You, Molly,—all the people in the town,—

I haven't the patience to live through the nine days' wonder.—I want to go away and be a governess."

"But, my dear Cynthia,—how soon Roger will be back,—a tower of strength."

"Has not mamma told you I have broken it all off with Roger? I wrote this morning. I wrote to his father. That letter will reach to-morrow. I wrote to Roger. If he ever receives that letter, I hope to be far away by that time; in Russia may be."

"Nonsense. An engagement like yours cannot be broken off, except by mutual consent. You've only given others a great deal of pain without freeing yourself. Nor will you wish it in a month's time. When you come to think calmly, you'll be glad to think of the stay and support of such a husband as Roger. You have been in fault, and have acted foolishly at first,—perhaps wrongly afterwards; but you don't want your husband to think you faultless?"

"Yes, I do," said Cynthia. "At any rate, my lover must think me so. And it is just because I do not love him even as so light a thing as I could love, that I feel that I couldn't bear to have to tell him I'm sorry, and stand before him like a chidden child to be admonished and forgiven."

"But here you are, just in such a position before me, Cynthia!"

"Yes! but I love you better than Roger; I've often told Molly so. And I would have told you, if I hadn't expected and hoped to leave you all before long. I could see if the recollection of it all came up before your mind; I could see it in your eyes; I should know it by instinct. I have a fine instinct for reading the thoughts of others when they refer to me. I almost hate the idea of Roger judging me by his own standard, which wasn't made for me, and graciously forgiving me at last."

"Then I do believe it's right for you to break it off," said Mr. Gibson, almost as if he were thinking to himself. "That poor poor lad! But it'll be best for him too. And he'll get over it. He has a good strong heart. Poor old Roger!"

For a moment Cynthia's wilful fancy stretched after the object passing out of her grasp,—Roger's love became for the instant a treasure; but, again, she knew that in its entirety of high undoubting esteem, as well as of passionate regard, it would no longer be hers; and for the flaw which she herself had made she cast it away, and would none of it. Yet often in after years, when it

was too late, she wondered and strove to penetrate the inscrutable mystery of "what would have been."

"Still, take till to-morrow before you act upon your decision," said Mr. Gibson, slowly. "What faults you have fallen into have been mere girlish faults at first,—leading you into much deceit, I grant."

"Don't give yourself the trouble to define the shades of blackness," said Cynthia, bitterly. "I'm not so obtuse but what I know them all better than any one can tell me. And as for my decision I acted upon it at once. It may be long before Roger gets my letter,—but I hope he is sure to get it at last,—and, as I said, I have let his father know; it won't hurt him! Oh, sir, I think if I had been differently brought up I shouldn't have had the sore angry heart I have. Now! No, don't! I don't want reasoning comfort. I can't stand it. I should always have wanted admiration and worship, and men's good opinion. Those unkind gossips! To visit Molly with their hard words! Oh, dear! I think life is very dreary."

She put her head down on her hands; tired out mentally as well as bodily. So Mr. Gibson thought. He felt as if much speech from him would only add to her excitement, and make her worse. He left the room, and called Molly, from where she was sitting, dolefully. "Go to Cynthia!" he whispered, and Molly went. She took Cynthia into her arms with gentle power, and laid her head against her own breast, as if the one had been a mother, and the other a child.

"Oh, my darling!" she murmured. "I do so love you, dear, dear Cynthia!" and she stroked her hair, and kissed her eyelids; Cynthia passive all the while, till suddenly she started up stung with a new idea, and looking Molly straight in the face, she said,—

"Molly, Roger will marry you! See if it isn't so! You two good——"

But Molly pushed her away with a sudden violence of repulsion. "Don't!" she said. She was crimson with shame and indignation. "Your husband this morning! Mine to-night! What do you take him for?"

"A man!" smiled Cynthia. "And therefore, if you won't let me call him changeable, I'll coin a word and call him consolable!" But Molly gave her back no answering smile. At this moment, the servant Maria entered the consulting-room, where the two girls were. She had a scared look.

"Isn't master here?" asked she, as if she distrusted her eyes.

"No!" said Cynthia. "I heard him go out. I heard him shut the front door not five minutes ago."

"Oh, dear!" said Maria. "And there's a man come on horseback from Hamley Hall, and he says as Mr. Osborne is dead, and that master must go off to the squire straight away."

"Osborne Hamley dead!" said Cynthia, in awed surprise. Molly was out at the front door, seeking the messenger through the dusk, round into the stable-yard, where the groom sate motionless on his dark horse, flecked with foam, made visible by the lantern placed on the steps near, where it had been left by the servants, who were dismayed at this news of the handsome young man who had frequented their master's house, so full of sportive elegance and winsomeness. Molly went up to the man, whose thoughts were lost in recollection of the scene he had left at the place he had come from.

She laid her hand on the hot damp skin of the horse's shoulder; the man started.

"Is the doctor coming, Miss?" For he saw who it was by the dim light.

"He is dead, is he not?" asked Molly, in a low voice.

"I'm afeard he is,—leastways, there is no doubt according to what they said. But I've ridden hard! there may be a chance. Is the doctor coming, Miss?"

"He is gone out. They are seeking him, I believe. I will go myself. Oh! the poor old squire!" She went into the kitchen—went over the house with swift rapidity to gain news of her father's whereabouts. The servants knew no more than she did. Neither she nor they had heard what Cynthia, ever quick of perception, had done. The shutting of the front door had fallen on deaf ears, as far as others were concerned. Upstairs sped Molly to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Gibson stood at the door, listening to the unusual stir in the house.

"What is it, Molly? Why, how white you look, child!"

"Where's papa?"

"Gone out. What's the matter?"

"Where?"

"How should I know? I was asleep; Jenny came upstairs on her way to the bedrooms; she's a girl who never keeps to her work, and Maria takes advantage of her."

"Jenny, Jenny!" cried Molly, frantic at the delay.

"Don't shout, dear,—ring the bell. What can be the matter?"

"Oh, Jenny!" said Molly, half-way up the stairs to meet her, "who wanted papa?"

Cynthia came to join the group; she too had been looking for traces or tidings of Mr. Gibson.

"What is the matter?" said Mrs. Gibson. "Can nobody speak and answer a question?"

"Osborne Hamley is dead!" said Cynthia, gravely.

"Dead! Osborne! Poor fellow! I knew it would be so, though, —I was sure of it. But Mr. Gibson can do nothing if he's dead. Poor young man! I wonder where Roger is now? He ought to come home."

Jenny had been blamed for coming into the drawing-room instead of Maria, whose place it was, and so had lost the few wits she had. To Molly's hurried questions her replies had been entirely unsatisfactory. A man had come to the back door—she could not see who it was—she had not asked his name: he wanted to speak to master,—master had seemed in a hurry, and only stopped to get his hat.

"He will not be long away," thought Molly, "or he would have left word where he was going. But oh! the poor father all alone!" And then a thought came into her head, which she acted upon straight. "Go to James, tell him to put the side-saddle I had in November on Nora Creina. Don't cry, Jenny. There's no time for that. No one is angry with you. Run!"

So down into the cluster of collected women Molly came, equipped in her jacket and skirt; quick determination in her eyes; controlled quivering about the corners of her mouth.

"Why, what in the world"—said Mrs. Gibson—"Molly, what are you thinking about?" But Cynthia had understood it at a glance, and was arranging Molly's hastily assumed dress, as she passed along.

"I am going. I must go. I cannot bear to think of him alone. When papa comes back he is sure to go to Hamley, and if I am not wanted, I can come back with him." She heard Mrs. Gibson's voice following her in remonstrance, but she did not stay for words. She had to wait in the stable-yard, and she wondered how the messenger could bear to eat and drink the food and beer brought out to him by the servants. Her coming out had evidently inter-

rupted the eager talk,—the questions and answers passing sharp to and fro; but she caught the words, "all amongst the tangled grass," and "the squire would let none on us touch him: he took him up as if he was a baby; he had to rest many a time, and once he sate him down on the ground; but still he kept him in his arms; but we thought we should ne'er have gotten him up again—him and the body."

"The body!"

Molly had never felt that Osborne was really dead till she heard these words. They rode quick under the shadows of the hedgerow trees, but when they slackened speed, to go up a brow, or to give their horses breath, Molly heard these two little words again in her ears; and said them over again to herself, in hopes of forcing the sharp truth into her unwilling sense. But when they came in sight of the square stillness of the house, shining in the moonlight—the moon had risen by this time—Molly caught at her breath, and for an instant she thought she never could go in, and face the presence in that dwelling. One yellow light burnt steadily, spotting the silver shining with its earthly coarseness. The man pointed it out: it was almost the first word he had spoken since they had left Hollingford.

"It's the old nursery. They carried him there. The squire broke down at the stair-foot, and they took him to the readiest place. I'll be bound for it the squire is there hisself, and old Robin too. They fetched him, as a knowledgable man among dumb beasts, till th' regular doctor came."

Molly dropped down from her seat before the man could dismount to help her. She gathered up her skirts and did not stay again to think of what was before her. She ran along the once familiar turns, and swiftly up the stairs, and through the doors, till she came to the last; then she stopped and listened. It was a deathly silence. She opened the door:—the squire was sitting alone at the side of the bed, holding the dead man's hand, and looking straight before him at vacancy. He did not stir or move, even so much as an eyelid, at Molly's entrance. The truth had entered his soul before this, and he knew that no doctor, be he ever so cunning, could, with all his striving, put the breath into that body again. Molly came up to him with the softest steps, the most hushed breath that ever she could. She did not speak, for she did not know what to say. She felt that he had no more hope from

earthly skill, so what was the use of speaking of her father and the delay in his coming? After a moment's pause, standing by the old man's side, she slipped down to the floor, and sat at his feet. Possibly her presence might have some balm in it; but uttering of words was as a vain thing. He must have been aware of her being there, but he took no apparent notice. There they sate, silent and still, he in his chair, she on the floor; the dead man, beneath the sheet, for a third. She fancied that she must have disturbed the father in his contemplation of the quiet face, now more than half, but not fully, covered up out of sight. Time had never seemed so without measure, silence had never seemed so noiseless as it did to Molly, sitting there. In the acuteness of her senses she heard a step mounting a distant staircase, coming slowly, coming nearer. She knew it not to be her father's, and that was all she cared about. Nearer and nearer—close to the outside of the door—a pause, and a soft hesitating tap. The great gaunt figure sitting by her side quivered at the sound. Molly rose and went to the door: it was Robinson, the old butler, holding in his hand a covered basin of soup.

"God bless you, Miss," said he; "make him touch a drop o' this: he's gone since breakfast without food, and it's past one in the morning now."

He softly removed the cover, and Molly took the basin back with her to her place at the squire's side. She did not speak, for she did not well know what to say, or how to present this homely want of nature before one so rapt in grief. But she put a spoonful to his lips, and touched them with the savoury food, as if he had been a sick child, and she the nurse; and instinctively he took down the first spoonful of the soup. But in a minute he said, with a sort of cry, and almost overturning the basin Molly held, by his passionate gesture as he pointed to the bed,—

"He will never eat again—never."

Then he threw himself across the corpse, and wept in such a terrible manner that Molly trembled lest he also should die—should break his heart there and then. He took no more notice of her words, of her tears, of her presence, than he did of that of the moon, looking through the unclosed window, with passionless stare. Her father stood by them both before either of them was aware.

"Go downstairs, Molly," said he gravely; but he stroked her head tenderly as she rose. "Go into the dining-room." Now she

felt the reaction from all her self-control. She trembled with fear as she went along the moonlit passages. It seemed to her as if she should meet Osborne, and hear it all explained; how he came to die,—what he now felt and thought and wished her to do. She did get down to the dining-room,—the last few steps with a rush of terror,—senseless terror of what might be behind her; and there she found supper laid out, and candles lit, and Robinson bustling about decanting some wine. She wanted to cry; to get into some quiet place, and weep away her over-excitement; but she could hardly do so there. She only felt very much tired, and to care for nothing in this world any more. But vividness of life came back when she found Robinson holding a glass to her lips as she sat in the great leather easy-chair, to which she had gone instinctively as to a place of rest.

"Drink, Miss. It's good old Madeira. Your papa said as how you was to eat a bit. Says he, 'My daughter may have to stay here, Mr. Robinson, and she's young for the work. Persuade her to eat something, or she'll break down utterly.' Those was his very words."

Molly did not say anything. She had not energy enough for resistance. She drank and she ate at the old servant's bidding; and then she asked him to leave her alone, and went back to her easy-chair and let herself cry, and so ease her heart.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SQUIRE HAMLEY'S SORROW.

It seemed very long before Mr. Gibson came down. He went and stood with his back to the empty fireplace, and did not speak for a minute or two.

"He's gone to bed," said he at length. "Robinson and I have got him there. But just as I was leaving him he called me back, and asked me to let you stop. I'm sure I don't know—but one doesn't like to refuse at such a time."

"I wish to stay," said Molly.

"Do you? There's a good girl. But how will you manage?"

"Oh, never mind that. I can manage. Papa"—she paused—"what did Osborne die of?" She asked the question in a low, awe-stricken voice.

"Something wrong about the heart. You wouldn't understand if I told you. I apprehended it for some time; but it's better not to talk of such things at home. When I saw him on Thursday week, he seemed better than I've seen him for a long time. I told Dr. Nicholls so. But one never can calculate in these complaints."

"You saw him on Thursday week? Why, you never mentioned it!" said Molly.

"No. I don't talk of my patients at home. Besides, I didn't want him to consider me as his doctor, but as a friend. Any alarm about his own health would only have hastened the catastrophe."

"Then didn't he know that he was ill—ill of a dangerous complaint, I mean: one that might end as it has done?"

"No; certainly not. He would only have been watching his symptoms—accelerating matters, in fact."

"Oh, papa!" said Molly, shocked.

"I've no time to go into the question," Mr. Gibson continued. "And until you know what has to be said on both sides, and in every instance, you are not qualified to judge. We must keep our attention on the duties in hand now. You sleep here for the remainder of the night, which is more than half-gone already?"

"Yes."

"Promise me to go to bed just as usual. You may not think it, but most likely you'll go to sleep at once. People do at your age."

"Papa, I think I ought to tell you something. I know a great secret of Osborne's, which I promised solemnly not to tell; but the last time I saw him I think he must have been afraid of something like this." A fit of sobbing came upon her, which her father was afraid would end in hysterics. But suddenly she mastered herself, and looked up into his anxious face, and smiled to reassure him.

"I could not help it, papa!"

"No. I know. Go on with what you were saying. You ought to be in bed; but if you've a secret on your mind you won't sleep."

"Osborne was married," said she, fixing her eyes on her father. "That is the secret."

"Married! Nonsense. What makes you think so?"

"He told me. That's to say, I was in the library—was reading there, some time ago; and Roger came and spoke to Osborne about his wife. Roger did not see me, but Osborne did. They made me promise secrecy. I don't think I did wrong."

"Don't worry yourself about right or wrong just now; tell me more about it, at once."

"I knew no more till six months ago—last November, when you went up to Lady Cumnor. Then he called, and gave me his wife's address, but still under promise of secrecy; and, excepting those two times, I have never heard any one mention the subject. I think he would have told me more that last time, only Miss Phœbe came in."

"Where is this wife of his?"

"Down in the south; near Winchester, I think. He said she was a Frenchwoman and a Roman Catholic; and I think he said she was a servant," added Molly.

"Phew!" Her father made a long whistle of dismay.

"And," continued Molly, "he spoke of a child. Now you

know as much as I do, papa, except the address. I have it written down safe at home."

Forgetting, apparently, what time of night it was, Mr. Gibson sate down, stretched out his legs before him, put his hands in his pockets, and began to think. Molly sate still without speaking, too tired to do more than wait.

"Well!" said he at last, jumping up, "nothing can be done to-night; by to-morrow morning, perhaps, I may find out. Poor little pale face!"—taking it between both his hands and kissing it; "poor, sweet, little pale face!" Then he rang the bell, and told Robinson to send some maid-servant to take Miss Gibson to her room.

"He won't be up early," said he, in parting. "The shock has lowered him too much to be energetic. Send breakfast up to him in his own room. I'll be here again before ten."

Late as it was before he left, he kept his word.

"Now, Molly," he said, "you and I must tell him the truth between us. I don't know how he will take it; it may comfort him, but I have very little hope: either way, he ought to know it at once."

"Robinson says he has gone into the room again, and he is afraid he has locked the door on the inside."

"Never mind. I shall ring the bell, and send up Robinson to say that I am here, and wish to speak to him."

The message returned was, "The squire's kind love, and could not see Mr. Gibson just then." Robinson added, "It was a long time before he'd answer at all, sir."

"Go up again, and tell him I can wait his convenience. Now that's a lie," Mr. Gibson said, turning round to Molly as soon as Robinson had left the room. "I ought to be far enough away at twelve; but, if I'm not much mistaken, the innate habits of a gentleman will make him uneasy at the idea of keeping me waiting his pleasure, and will do more to bring him out of that room into this than any entreaties or reasoning." Mr. Gibson was growing impatient though, before they heard the squire's footstep on the stairs; he was evidently coming slowly and unwillingly. He came in almost like one blind, groping along, and taking hold of chair or table for support or guidance till he reached Mr. Gibson. He did not speak when he held the doctor by the hand; he only hung down his head, and kept on a feeble shaking of welcome.

"I'm brought very low, sir. I suppose it's God's doing; but it comes hard upon me. He was my firstborn child." He said this almost as if speaking to a stranger, and informing him of facts of which he was ignorant.

"Here's Molly," said Mr. Gibson, choking a little himself, and pushing her forwards.

"I beg your pardon; I did not see you at first. My mind is a good deal occupied just now." He sate heavily down, and then seemed almost to forget they were there. Molly wondered what was to come next. Suddenly her father spoke,—

"Where's Roger?" said he. "Is he not likely to be soon at the Cape?" He got up and looked at the directions of one or two unopened letters brought by that morning's post; among them was one in Cynthia's handwriting. Both Molly and he saw it at the same time. How long it was since yesterday! But the squire took no notice of their proceedings or their looks.

"You will be glad to have Roger at home as soon as may be, I think, sir. Some months must elapse first; but I'm sure he will return as speedily as possible."

The squire said something in a very low voice. Both father and daughter strained their ears to hear what it was. They both believed it to be, "Roger isn't Osborne!" And Mr. Gibson spoke on that belief. He spoke more quietly than Molly had ever heard him do before.

"No! we know that. I wish that anything that Roger could do, or that I could do, or that any one could do, would comfort you; but it is past human comfort."

"I do try to say, God's will be done, sir," said the squire, looking up at Mr. Gibson for the first time, and speaking with more life in his voice; "but it's harder to be resigned than happy people think." They were all silent for a while. The squire himself was the first to speak again,—"He was my first child, sir; my eldest son. And of late years we weren't"—his voice broke down, but he controlled himself—"we weren't quite as good friends as could be wished; and I'm not sure—not sure that he knew how I loved him." And now he cried aloud with an exceeding bitter cry.

"Better so!" whispered Mr. Gibson to Molly. "When he's a little calmer, don't be afraid; tell him all you know, exactly as it happened."

Molly began. Her voice sounded high and unnatural to herself,

as if some one else was speaking, but she made her words clear. The squire did not attempt to listen, at first, at any rate.

"One day when I was here, at the time of Mrs. Hamley's last illness" (the squire here checked his convulsive breathing), "I was in the library, and Osborne came in. He said he had only come in for a book, and that I was not to mind him, so I went on reading. Presently, Roger came along the flagged garden-path just outside the window (which was open). He did not see me in the corner where I was sitting, and said to Osborne, 'Here's a letter from your wife!'"

Now the squire was all attention; for the first time his tear-swollen eyes met the eyes of another, and he looked at Molly with searching anxiety, as he repeated, "His wife! Osborne married!" Molly went on:

"Osborne was angry with Roger for speaking out before me, and they made me promise never to mention it to any one; or to allude to it to either of them again. I never named it to papa till last night."

"Go on," said Mr. Gibson. "Tell the squire about Osborne's call—what you told me!" Still the squire hung on her lips, listening with open mouth and eyes.

"Some months ago Osborne called. He was not well, and wanted to see papa. Papa was away, and I was alone. I don't exactly remember how it came about, but he spoke to me of his wife for the first and only time since the affair in the library." She looked at her father, as if questioning him as to the desirableness of telling the few further particulars that she knew. The squire's mouth was dry and stiff, but he tried to say, "Tell me all,—everything." And Molly understood the half-formed words.

"He said his wife was a good woman, and that he loved her dearly; but she was a French Roman Catholic, and a"—another glance at her father—"she had been a servant once. That was all; except that I have her address at home. He wrote it down and gave it me."

"Well, well!" moaned the squire. "It's all over now. All over. All past and gone. We'll not blame him,—no; but I wish he'd ha' told me; he and I to live together with such a secret in one of us. It's no wonder to me now—nothing can be a wonder again, for one never can tell what's in a man's heart. Married so long! and we sitting together at meals—and living together. Why, I told

him everything! Too much, may be, for I showed him all my passions and ill-tempers! Married so long! Oh, Osborne, Osborne, you should have told me!"

"Yes, he should!" said Mr. Gibson. "But I daresay he knew how much you would dislike such a choice as he had made. But he should have told you!"

"You know nothing about it, sir," said the squire sharply. "You don't know the terms we were on. Not hearty or confidential. I was cross to him many a time; angry with him for being dull, poor lad—and he with all this weight on his mind. I won't have people interfering and judging between me and my sons. And Roger too! He could know it all, and keep it from me!"

"Osborne evidently had bound him down to secrecy, just as he bound me," said Molly; "Roger could not help himself."

"Osborne was such a fellow for persuading people, and winning them over," said the squire, dreamily. "I remember—but what's the use of remembering? It's all over, and Osborne's dead without opening his heart to me. I could have been tender to him, I could. But he'll never know it now!"

"But we can guess what wish he had strongest in his mind at the last, from what we do know of his life," said Mr. Gibson.

"What, sir?" said the squire, with sharp suspicion of what was coming.

"His wife must have been his last thought, must she not?"

"How do I know she was his wife? Do you think he'd go and marry a French baggage of a servant? It may be all a tale trumped up."

"Stop, squire. I don't care to defend my daughter's truth or accuracy. But, with the dead man's body lying upstairs—his soul with God—think twice before you say more hasty words, impugning his character; if she was not his wife, what was she?"

"I beg your pardon. I hardly know what I'm saying. Did I accuse Osborne? Oh, my lad, my lad—thou might have trusted thy old dad! He used to call me his 'old dad' when he was a little chap not bigger than this," indicating a certain height with his hand. "I never meant to say he was not—not what one would wish to think him now—his soul with God, as you say very justly—for I'm sure it is there—"

"Well! but, squire," said Mr. Gibson, trying to check the other's rambling, "to return to his wife——"

"And the child," whispered Molly to her father. Low as the whisper was, it struck on the squire's ear.

"What?" said he, turning round to her suddenly, "—child? You never named that? Is there a child? Husband and father, and I never knew! God bless Osborne's child! I say, God bless it!" He stood up reverently, and the other two instinctively rose. He closed his hands as if in momentary prayer. Then exhausted he sate down again, and put out his hand to Molly.

"You're a good girl. Thank you.—Tell me what I ought to do, and I'll do it." This to Mr. Gibson.

"I'm almost as much puzzled as you are, squire," replied he. "I fully believe the whole story; but I think there must be some written confirmation of it, which perhaps ought to be found at once, before we act. Most probably this is to be discovered among Osborne's papers. Will you look over them at once? Molly shall return with me, and find the address that Osborne gave her, while you are busy——"

"She'll come back again?" said the squire eagerly. "You—she won't leave me to myself?"

"No! She shall come back this evening. I'll manage to send her somehow. But she has no clothes but the habit she came in, and I want my horse that she rode away upon."

"Take the carriage," said the squire. "Take anything. I'll give orders. You'll come back again, too?"

"No! I'm afraid not, to-day. I'll come to-morrow, early. Molly shall return this evening, whenever it suits you to send for her."

"This afternoon; the carriage shall be at your house at three. I dare not look at Osborne's—at the papers without one of you with me; and yet I shall never rest till I know more."

"I'll send the desk in by Robinson before I leave. And—can you give me some lunch before I go?"

Little by little he led the squire to eat a morsel or so of food; and so, strengthening him physically, and encouraging him mentally, Mr. Gibson hoped that he could begin his researches during Molly's absence.

There was something touching in the squire's wistful looks after Molly as she moved about. A stranger might have imagined her to be his daughter instead of Mr. Gibson's. The meek, broken-down, considerate ways of the bereaved father never showed themselves more

strongly than when he called them back to his chair, out of which he seemed too languid to rise, and said, as if by an after-thought: "Give my love to Miss Kirkpatrick; tell her I look upon her as quite one of the family. I shall be glad to see her after—after the funeral. I don't think I can before."

"He knows nothing of Cynthia's resolution to give up Roger," said Mr. Gibson as they rode away. "I had a long talk with her last night, but she was as resolute as ever. From what your mamma tells me, there is a third lover in London, whom she's already refused. I'm thankful that you've no lover at all, Molly, unless that abortive attempt of Mr. Coxe's at an offer, long ago, can be called a lover."

"I never heard of it, papa!" said Molly.

"Oh, no; I forgot. What a fool I was! Why, don't you remember the hurry I was in to get you off to Hamley Hall, the very first time you ever went? It was all because I got hold of a desperate love-letter from Coxe, addressed to you."

But Molly was too tired to be amused, or even interested. She could not get over the sight of the straight body covered with a sheet, which yet let the outlines be seen,—all that remained of Osborne. Her father had trusted too much to the motion of the ride, and the change of scene from the darkened house. He saw his mistake.

"Some one must write to Mrs. Osborne Hamley," said he. "I believe her to have a legal right to the name; but whether or no, she must be told that the father of her child is dead. Shall you do it, or I?"

"Oh, you, please, papa!"

"I will, if you wish. But she may have heard of you as a friend of her dead husband's; while of me—a mere country doctor—it's very probable she has never heard the name."

"If I ought, I will do it." Mr. Gibson did not like this ready acquiescence, given in so few words, too.

"There's Hollingford church-spire," said she presently, as they drew near the town, and caught a glimpse of the church through the trees. "I think I never wish to go out of sight of it again."

"Nonsense!" said he. "Why, you've all your travelling to do yet; and if these new-fangled railways spread, as they say they will, we shall all be spinning about the world; 'sitting on tea-kettles,' as Phœbe Browning calls it. Miss Browning wrote such a capital letter of advice to Miss Hornblower. I heard of it at the

Millers'. Miss Hornblower was going to travel by railroad for the first time; and Dorothy was very anxious, and sent her directions for her conduct; one piece of advice was not to sit on the boiler."

Molly laughed a little, as she was expected to do. "Here we are at home, at last."

Mrs. Gibson gave Molly a warm welcome. For one thing, Cynthia was in disgrace; for another, Molly came from the centre of news; for a third, Mrs. Gibson was really fond of the girl, in her way, and sorry to see her pale heavy looks.

"To think of it all being so sudden at last. Not but what I always expected it! And so provoking! Just when Cynthia had given up Roger! If she had only waited a day! What does the squire say to it all?"

"He is beaten down with grief," replied Molly.

"Indeed! I should not have fancied he had liked the engagement so much."

"What engagement?"

"Why, Roger to Cynthia, to be sure. I asked you how the squire took her letter, announcing the breaking of it off?"

"Oh—I made a mistake. He hasn't opened his letters to-day. I saw Cynthia's among them."

"Now that I call positive disrespect."

"I don't know. He did not mean it for such. Where is Cynthia?"

"Gone out into the meadow-garden. She'll be in directly. I wanted her to do some errands for me, but she flatly refused to go nto the town. I am afraid she mismanages her affairs badly. But she won't allow me to interfere. I hate to look at such things in a mercenary spirit, but it is provoking to see her throw over two such good matches. First Mr. Henderson, and now Roger Hamley. When does the squire expect Roger? Does he think he will come back sooner for poor dear Osborne's death?"

"I don't know. He hardly seems to think of anything but Osborne. He appears to me to have almost forgotten every one else. But perhaps the news of Osborne's being married, and of the child, may rouse him up."

Molly had no doubt that Osborne was really and truly married, nor had she any idea that her father had never breathed the facts of which she had told him on the previous night, to his wife or Cynthia. But Mr. Gibson had been slightly dubious of the full legality of the

marriage, and had not felt inclined to speak of it to his wife until that had been ascertained one way or another. So Mrs. Gibson exclaimed, "What *do* you mean, child? Married! Osborne married. Who says so?"

"Oh, dear! I suppose I ought not to have named it. I'm very stupid to-day. Yes! Osborne has been married a long time; but the squire did not know of it till this morning. I think it has done him good. But I don't know."

"Who is the lady? Why, I call it a shame to go about as a single man, and be married all the time! If there is one thing that revolts me, it is duplicity. Who is the lady? Do tell me all you know about it, there's a dear."

"She is French, and a Roman Catholic," said Molly.

"French! They are such beguiling women; and he was so much abroad! You said there was a child,—is it a boy or a girl?"

"I did not hear. I did not ask."

Molly did not think it necessary to do more than answer questions; indeed, she was vexed enough to have told anything of what her father evidently considered it desirable to keep secret. Just then Cynthia came wandering into the room with a careless, hopeless look in her face, which Molly noticed at once. She had not heard of Molly's arrival, and had no idea that she was returned until she saw her sitting there.

"Molly, darling! Is that you? You're as welcome as the flowers in May, though you've not been gone twenty-four hours. But the house is not the same when you are away!"

"And she brings us such news too!" said Mrs. Gibson. "I'm really almost glad you wrote to the squire yesterday, for if you had waited till to-day—I thought you were in too great a hurry at the time—he might have thought you had some interested reason for giving up your engagement. Osborne Hamley was married all this time unknown to everybody, and has got a child too."

"Osborne married!" exclaimed Cynthia. "If ever a man looked a bachelor, he did. Poor Osborne! with his fair delicate elegance,—he looked so young and boyish!"

"Yes! it was a great piece of deceit, and I can't easily forgive him for it. Only think! If he had paid either of you any particular attention, and you had fallen in love with him! Why, he might have broken your heart, or Molly's either. I can't forgive him, even though he is dead, poor fellow!"

"Well, as he never did pay either of us any particular attention, and as we neither of us did fall in love with him, I think I only feel sorry that he had all the trouble and worry of concealment." Cynthia spoke with a pretty keen recollection of how much trouble and worry her concealment had cost her.

"And now of course it is a son, and will be the heir, and Roger will just be as poorly off as ever. I hope you'll take care and let the squire know Cynthia was quite ignorant of these new facts that have come out when she wrote those letters, Molly? I should not like a suspicion of worldliness to rest upon any one with whom I had any concern."

"He has not read Cynthia's letter yet. Oh, do let me bring it home unopened," said Molly. "Send another letter to Roger—now—at once; it will reach him at the same time; he will get both when he arrives at the Cape, and make him understand which is the last—the real one. Think! he will hear of Osborne's death at the same time—two such sad things! Do, Cynthia!"

"No, my dear," said Mrs. Gibson. "I could not allow that, even if Cynthia felt inclined for it. Asking to be re-engaged to him! At any rate, she must wait now until he proposes again, and we see how things turn out."

But Molly kept her pleading eyes fixed on Cynthia.

"No!" said Cynthia firmly, but not without consideration. "It cannot be. I've felt more content this last night than I've done for weeks past. I'm glad to be free. I dreaded Roger's goodness, and learning, and all that. It was not in my way, and I don't believe I should have ever married him, even without knowing of all these ill-natured stories that are circulating about me, and which he would hear of, and expect me to explain, and be sorry for, and penitent and humble. I know he could not have made me happy, and I don't believe he would have been happy with me. It must stay as it is. I would rather be a governess than married to him. I should get weary of him every day of my life."

"Weary of Roger!" said Molly to herself. "It is best as it is, I see," she answered aloud. "Only I am very sorry for him, very. He did love you so. You will never get any one to love you like him!"

"Very well. I must take my chance. And too much love is rather oppressive to me, I believe. I like a great deal, widely spread about; not all confined to one individual lover."

"I don't believe you," said Molly. "But don't let us talk any more about it. It is best as it is. I thought—I almost felt sure you would be sorry this morning. But we will leave it alone now." She sate silently looking out of the window, her heart sorely stirred, she scarcely knew how or why. But she could not have spoken. Most likely she would have begun to cry if she had spoken. Cynthia stole softly up to her after a while.

"You are vexed with me, Molly," she began in a low voice. But Molly turned sharply round.

"I! I have no business at all in the affair. It is for you to judge. Do what you think right. I believe you have done right. Only I don't want to discuss it, and paw it over with talk. I'm very much tired, dear"—gently now she spoke—"and I hardly know what I say. If I speak crossly, don't mind it." Cynthia did not reply at once. Then she said,—

"Do you think I might go with you, and help you? I might have done yesterday; and you say he hasn't opened my letter, so he has not heard as yet. And I was always fond of poor Osborne, in my way, you know."

"I cannot tell; I have no right to say," replied Molly, scarcely understanding Cynthia's motives, which, after all, were only impulses in this case. "Papa would be able to judge; I think, perhaps, you had better not. But don't go by my opinion; I can only tell what I should wish to do in your place."

"It was as much for your sake as any one's, Molly," said Cynthia.

"Oh, then, don't! I am tired to-day with sitting up; but to-morrow I shall be all right; and I should not like it, if, for my sake, you came into the house at so solemn a time."

"Very well!" said Cynthia, half-glad that her impulsive offer was declined; for, as she said, thinking to herself, "It would have been awkward after all." So Molly went back in the carriage alone, wondering how she should find the squire; wondering what discoveries he had made among Osborne's papers, and at what conviction he would have arrived.

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNLOOKED-FOR ARRIVALS.

Robinson opened the door for Molly almost before the carriage had fairly drawn up at the Hall, and told her that the squire had been very anxious for her return, and had more than once sent him to an upstairs window, from which a glimpse of the hill-road between Hollingford and Hamley could be caught, to know if the carriage was not yet in sight. Molly went into the drawing-room. The squire was standing in the middle of the floor awaiting her—in fact, longing to go out and meet her, but restrained by a feeling of solemn etiquette, which prevented his moving about as usual in that house of mourning. He held a paper in his hands, which were trembling with excitement and emotion; and four or five open letters were strewed on a table near him.

"It's all true," he began; "she's his wife, and he's her husband —was her husband—that's the word for it—was! Poor lad! poor lad! it's cost him a deal. Pray God, it wasn't my fault. Read this, my dear. It's a certificate. It's all regular—Osborne Hamley to Marie-Aimée Scherer,—parish-church and all, and witnessed. Oh, dear!" He sate down in the nearest chair and groaned. Molly took a seat by him, and read the legal paper, the perusal of which was not needed to convince her of the fact of the marriage. She held it in her hand after she had finished reading it, waiting for the squire's next coherent words; for he kept talking to himself in broken sentences. "Ay, ay! that comes o' temper, and crabbedness. She was the only one as could,—and I have been worse since she was gone. Worse! worse! and see what it has come to! He was afraid of me—ay—afraid. That's the truth of it—afraid. And it made him keep all to himself, and care killed him. They may call it heart-disease—O my lad, my lad, I know better now; but it's too

late—that's the sting of it—too late, too late!" He covered his face, and moved himself backward and forward till Molly could bear it no longer.

"There are some letters," said she: "may I read any of them?" At another time she would not have asked; but she was driven to it now by her impatience of the speechless grief of the old man.

"Ay, read 'em, read 'em," said he. "Maybe you can. I can only pick out a word here and there. I put 'em there for you to look at; and tell me what is in 'em."

Molly's knowledge of written French of the present day was not so great as her knowledge of the French of the *Mémoires de Sully*, and neither the spelling nor the writing of the letters was of the best; but she managed to translate into good enough colloquial English some innocent sentences of love, and submission to Osborne's will—as if his judgment was infallible,—and of faith in his purposes,—little sentences in "little language" that went home to the squire's heart. Perhaps if Molly had read French more easily she might not have translated them into such touching, homely, broken words. Here and there, there were expressions in English; these the hungry-hearted squire had read while waiting for Molly's return. Every time she stopped, he said, "Go on." He kept his face shaded, and only repeated those two words at every pause. She got up to find some more of Aimée's letters. In examining the papers, she came upon one in particular. "Have you seen this, sir? This certificate of baptism" (reading aloud) "of Roger Stephen Osborne Hamley, born June 21, 183-, child of Osborne Hamley and Marie-Aimée his wife—"

"Give it me," said the squire, his voice breaking now, and stretching forth his eager hand. "'Roger,' that's me, 'Stephen,' that's my poor old father: he died when he was not so old as I am; but I've always thought on him as very old. He was main and fond of Osborne, when he was quite a little one. It's good of the lad to have thought on my father Stephen. Ay! that was his name. And Osborne—Osborne Hamley! One Osborne Hamley lies dead on his bed—and t'other—t'other I've never seen, and never heard on till to-day. He must be called Osborne, Molly. There is a Roger—there's two for that matter; but one is a good-for-nothing old man; and there's never an Osborne any more, unless this little thing is called Osborne; we'll have him here, and get a nurse for

him; and make his mother comfortable for life in her own country. I'll keep this, Molly. You're a good lass for finding it. Osborne Hamley! And if God will give me grace, he shall never hear a cross word from me—never! He shan't be afeard of me. Oh, *my* Osborne, *my* Osborne" (he burst out), "do you know how bitter and sore is my heart for every hard word as I ever spoke to you? Do you know now how I loved you—my boy—my boy?"

From the general tone of the letters, Molly doubted if the mother would consent, so easily as the squire seemed to expect, to be parted from her child. They were not very wise, perhaps (though of this Molly never thought), but a heart full of love spoke tender words in every line. Still, it was not for Molly to talk of this doubt of hers just then; but rather to dwell on the probable graces and charms of the little Roger Stephen Osborne Hamley. She let the squire exhaust himself in wondering as to the particulars of every event, helping him out in conjectures; and both of them, from their imperfect knowledge of possibilities, made the most curious, fantastic, and improbable guesses at the truth. And so that day passed over, and the night came.

There were not many people who had any claim to be invited to the funeral, and of these Mr. Gibson and the squire's hereditary man of business had taken charge. But when Mr. Gibson came, early on the following morning, Molly referred the question to him, which had suggested itself to her mind, though apparently not to the squire's, what intimation of her loss should be sent to the widow, living solitary near Winchester, watching and waiting, if not for his coming who lay dead in his distant home, at least for his letters. One from her had already come, in her foreign hand-writing, to the post-office to which all her communications were usually sent, but of course they at the Hall knew nothing of this.

"She must be told," said Mr. Gibson, musing.

"Yes, she must," replied his daughter. "But how?"

"A day or two of waiting will do no harm," said he, almost as if he was anxious to delay the solution of the problem. "It will make her anxious, poor thing, and all sorts of gloomy possibilities will suggest themselves to her mind—amongst them the truth; it will be a kind of preparation."

"For what? Something must be done at last," said Molly.

"Yes; true. Suppose you write, and say he's very ill; write to-morrow. I daresay they've indulged themselves in daily postage,

and then she'll have had three days' silence. You say how you come to know all you do about it; I think she ought to know he is very ill—in great danger, if you like: and you can follow it up next day with the full truth. I wouldn't worry the squire about it. After the funeral we will have a talk about the child."

"She will never part with it," said Molly.

"Whew! Till I see the woman I can't tell," said her father; "some women would. It will be well provided for, according to what you say. And she's a foreigner, and may very likely wish to go back to her own people and kindred. There's much to be said on both sides."

"So you always say, papa. But in this case I think you'll find I'm right. I judge from her letters; but I think I'm right."

"So you always say, daughter. Time will show. So the child is a boy? Mrs. Gibson told me particularly to ask. It will go far to reconciling her to Cynthia's dismissal of Roger. But indeed it is quite as well for both of them, though of course he will be a long time before he thinks so. They were not suited to each other. Poor Roger! It was hard work writing to him yesterday; and who knows what may have become of him! Well, well! one has to get through the world somehow. I'm glad, however, this little lad has turned up to be the heir. I shouldn't have liked the property to go to the Irish Hamleys, who are the next heirs, as Osborne once told me. Now write that letter, Molly, to the poor little Frenchwoman out yonder. It will prepare her for it; and we must think a bit how to spare her the shock, for Osborne's sake."

The writing this letter was rather difficult work for Molly, and she tore up two or three copies before she could manage it to her satisfaction; and at last, in despair of ever doing it better, she sent it off without re-reading it. The next day was easier; the fact of Osborne's death was told briefly and tenderly. But when this second letter was sent off, Molly's heart began to bleed for the poor creature, bereft of her husband, in a foreign land, and he at a distance from her, dead and buried without her ever having had the chance of printing his dear features on her memory by one last long lingering look. With her thoughts full of the unknown Aimée, Molly talked much about her that day to the squire. He would listen for ever to any conjecture, however wild, about the grandchild, but perpetually winced away from all discourse about "the Frenchwoman," as he called her; not unkindly, but to his mind she

was simply the Frenchwoman—chattering, dark-eyed, demonstrative, and possibly even rouged. He would treat her with respect as his son's widow, and would try even not to think upon the female inveiglement in which he believed. He would make her an allowance to the extent of his duty: but he hoped and trusted he might never be called upon to see her. His solicitor, Gibson, anybody and everybody, should be called upon to form a phalanx of defence against that danger.

And all this time a little young grey-eyed woman was making her way,—not towards him, but towards the dead son, whom as yet she believed to be her living husband. She knew she was acting in defiance of his expressed wish; but he had never dismayed her with any expression of his own fears about his health; and she, bright with life, had never contemplated death coming to fetch away one so beloved. He was ill—very ill, the letter from the strange girl said that; but Aimée had nursed her parents, and knew what illness was. The French doctor had praised her skill and neat-handedness as a nurse, and even if she had been the clumsiest of women, was he not her husband—her all? And was she not his wife, whose place was by his pillow? So, without even as much reasoning as has been here given, Aimée made her preparations, swallowing down the tears that would overflow her eyes, and drop into the little trunk she was packing so neatly. And by her side, on the ground, sate the child, now nearly two years old; and for him Aimée had always a smile and a cheerful word. Her servant loved her and trusted her; and the woman was of an age to have had experience of humankind. Aimée had told her that her husband was ill, and the servant had known enough of the household history to be aware that as yet Aimée was not his acknowledged wife. But she sympathized with the prompt decision of her mistress to go to him directly, wherever he was. Caution comes from education of one kind or another, and Aimée was not dismayed by warnings; only the woman pleaded hard for the child to be left. "He was such company," she said; "and he would so tire his mother in her journeyings; and maybe his father would be too ill to see him." To which Aimée replied, "Good company for you, but better for me. A woman is never tired with carrying her own child" (which was not true; but there was sufficient truth in it to make it believed by both mistress and servant), "and if Monsieur could care for anything, he would rejoice to hear the babble of his little son." So Aimée caught the evening

coach to London at the nearest cross-road, Martha standing by as chaperon and friend to see her off, and handing her in the large lusty child, already crowing with delight at the sight of the horses. There was a "lingerie" shop, kept by a Frenchwoman, whose acquaintance Aimée had made in the days when she was a London nursemaid, and thither she betook herself, rather than to an hotel, to spend the few night-hours that intervened before the Birmingham coach started at early morning. She slept or watched on a sofa in the parlour, for spare-bed there was none; but Madame Pauline came in betimes with a good cup of coffee for the mother, and of "soupe blanche" for the boy; and they went off again into the wide world, only thinking of, only seeking the "him," who was everything human to both. Aimée remembered the sound of the name of the village where Osborne had often told her that he alighted from the coach to walk home; and though she could never have spelt the strange uncouth word, yet she spoke it with pretty slow distinctness to the guard, asking him in her broken English when they should arrive there? Not till four o'clock. Alas! and what might happen before then! Once with him she would have no fear; she was sure that she could bring him round; but what might not happen before he was in her tender care? She was a very capable person in many ways, though so childish and innocent in others. She made up her mind to the course she should take when the coach set her down at Feversham. She asked for a man to carry her trunk, and show her the way to Hamley Hall.

"Hamley Hall!" said the innkeeper. "Eh! there's a deal o' trouble there just now."

"I know, I know," said she, hastening off after the wheelbarrow in which her trunk was going, and breathlessly struggling to keep up with it, her heavy child asleep in her arms. Her pulses beat all over her body; she could hardly see out of her eyes. To her, a foreigner, the drawn blinds of the house, when she came in sight of it, had no significance; she hurried, stumbled on.

"Back door or front, missus?" asked the boots from the inn.

"The most nearest," said she. And the front door was "the most nearest." Molly was sitting with the squire in the darkened drawing-room, reading out her translations of Aimée's letters to her husband. The squire was never weary of hearing them; the very sound of Molly's voice soothed and comforted him, it was so sweet and low. And he pulled her up, much as a child does, if on a

second reading of the same letter she substituted one word for another. The house was very still this afternoon,—still as it had been now for several days; every servant in it, however needlessly, moving about on tiptoe, speaking below the breath, and shutting doors as softly as might be. The nearest noise or stir of active life was that of the rooks in the trees, who were beginning their spring chatter of business. Suddenly, through this quiet, there came a ring at the front-door bell that sounded, and went on sounding, through the house, pulled by an ignorant vigorous hand. Molly stopped reading; she and the squire looked at each other in surprised dismay. Perhaps a thought of Roger's sudden (and impossible) return was in the mind of each; but neither spoke. They heard Robinson hurrying to answer the unwonted summons. They listened; but they heard no more. There was little more to hear. When the old servant opened the door, a lady with a child in her arms stood there. She gasped out her ready-prepared English sentence.

"Can I see Mr. Osborne Hamley? He is ill, I know; but I am his wife."

Robinson had been aware that there was some mystery, long suspected by the servants, and come to light at last to the master, —he had guessed that there was a young woman in the case; but when she stood there before him, asking for her dead husband as if he were living, any presence of mind Robinson might have had forsook him; he could not tell her the truth,—he could only leave the door open, and say to her, "Wait awhile, I'll come back," and betake himself to the drawing-room where Molly was, he knew. He went up to her in a flutter and a hurry, and whispered something to her which turned her white with dismay.

"What is it? What is it?" said the squire, trembling with excitement. "Don't keep it from me. I can bear it. Roger——"

They both thought he was going to faint; he had risen up and came close to Molly; suspense would be worse than anything.

"Mrs. Osborne Hamley is here," said Molly. "I wrote to tell her her husband was very ill, and she has come."

"She does not know what has happened, seemingly," said Robinson.

"I can't see her—I can't see her," said the squire, shrinking away into a corner. "You will go, Molly, won't you? You'll go."

Molly stood for a moment or two, irresolute. She, too, shrank from the interview. Robinson put in his word: "She looks but a weakly thing, and has carried a big baby, choose how far, I didn't stop to ask."

At this instant the door softly opened, and right into the midst of them came the little figure in grey, looking ready to fall with the weight of her child.

"You are Molly," said she, not seeing the squire at once. "The lady who wrote the letter; he spoke of you sometimes. You will let me go to him."

Molly did not answer, except that at such moments the eyes speak solemnly and comprehensively. Aimée read their meaning. All she said was,—"He is not—oh, my husband—my husband!" Her arms relaxed, her figure swayed, the child screamed and held out his arms for help. That help was given him by his grandfather, just before Aimée fell senseless on the floor.

"Maman, maman!" cried the little fellow, now striving and fighting to get back to her, where she lay; he fought so lustily that the squire had to put him down, and he crawled to the poor inanimate body, behind which sat Molly, holding the head; whilst Robinson rushed away for water, wine, and more womankind.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" said the squire, bending over her, and crying afresh over her suffering. "She is but young, Molly, and she must ha' loved him dearly."

"To be sure!" said Molly, quickly. She was untying the bonnet, and taking off the worn, but neatly mended gloves; there was the soft luxuriant black hair, shading the pale, innocent face,—the little notable-looking brown hands, with the wedding-ring for sole ornament. The child clustered his fingers round one of hers, and nestled up against her with his plaintive cry, getting more and more into a burst of wailing: "Maman, maman!" At the growing acuteness of his imploring, her hand moved, her lips quivered, consciousness came partially back. She did not open her eyes, but great heavy tears stole out from beneath her eyelashes. Molly held her head against her own breast; and they tried to give her wine,—which she shrank from—water, which she did not reject; that was all. At last she tried to speak. "Take me away," she said, "into the dark. Leave me alone."

So Molly and the women lifted her up and carried her away, and laid her on the bed, in the best bed-chamber in the house, and

'Maman, Maman!"

darkened the already shaded light. She was like an unconscious corpse herself, in that she offered neither assistance nor resistance to all that they were doing. But just before Molly was leaving the room to take up her watch outside the door, she felt rather than heard that Aimée spoke to her.

"Food—bread and milk for baby." But when they brought her food herself, she only shrank away and turned her face to the wall without a word. In the hurry, the child had been left with Robinson and the squire. For some unknown, but most fortunate reason, he took a dislike to Robinson's red face and hoarse voice, and showed a most decided preference for his grandfather. When Molly came down she found the squire feeding the child, with more of peace upon his face than there had been for all these days. The boy was every now and then leaving off taking his bread and milk to show his dislike to Robinson by word and gesture: a proceeding which only amused the old servant, while it highly delighted the more favoured squire.

"She is lying very still, but she will neither speak nor eat. I don't even think she is crying," said Molly, volunteering this account, for the squire was, for the moment, too much absorbed in his grandson to ask many questions.

Robinson put in his word: "Dick Hayward, he's Boots at the Hamley Arms, says the coach she come by started at five this morning from London, and the passengers said she'd been crying a deal on the road, when she thought folks were not noticing; and she never came in to meals with the rest, but stopped feeding her child."

"She'll be tired out; we must let her rest," said the squire. "And I do believe this little chap is going to sleep in my arms. God bless him." But Molly stole out, and sent off a lad to Hollingford with a note to her father. Her heart had warmed towards the poor stranger, and she felt uncertain as to what ought to be the course pursued in her case.

She went up from time to time to look at the girl, scarce older than herself, who lay there with her eyes open, but as motionless as death. She softly covered her over, and let her feel the sympathetic presence from time to time; and that was all she was allowed to do. The squire was curiously absorbed in the child, but Molly's supreme tenderness was for the mother. Not but what she admired the sturdy, gallant, healthy little fellow, whose every limb, and square

inch of clothing, showed the tender and thrifty care that had been taken of him. By-and-by the squire said in a whisper,—

"She's not like a Frenchwoman, is she, Molly?"

"I don't know. I don't know what Frenchwomen are like. People say Cynthia is French."

"And she didn't look like a servant? We won't speak of Cynthia since she's served my Roger so. Why, I began to think, as soon as I could think after *that*, how I would make Roger and her happy, and have them married at once; and then came that letter! I never wanted her for a daughter-in-law, not I. But he did, it seems; and he wasn't one for wanting many things for himself. But it's all over now; only we won't talk of her; and maybe, as you say, she was more French than English. This poor thing looks like a gentlewoman, I think. I hope she's got friends who'll take care of her,—she can't be above twenty. I thought she must be older than my poor lad!"

"She's a gentle, pretty creature," said Molly. "But—but I sometimes think it has killed her; she lies like one dead." And Molly could not keep from crying softly at the thought.

"Nay, nay!" said the squire. "It's not so easy to break one's heart. Sometimes I've wished it were. But one has to go on living—all the appointed days, as is said in the Bible. But we'll do our best for her. We'll not think of letting her go away till she's fit to travel."

Molly wondered in her heart about this going away, on which the squire seemed fully resolved. She was sure that he intended to keep the child; perhaps he had a legal right to do so;—but would the mother ever part from it? Her father, however, would solve the difficulty,—her father, whom she always looked to as so clear-seeing and experienced. She watched and waited for his coming. The February evening drew on; the child lay asleep in the squire's arms till his grandfather grew tired, and laid him down on the sofa: the large square-cornered yellow sofa upon which Mrs. Hamley used to sit, supported by pillows in a half-reclining position. Since her time it had been placed against the wall, and had served merely as a piece of furniture to fill up the room. But once again a human figure was lying upon it; a little human creature, like a cherub in some old Italian picture. The squire remembered his wife as he put the child down. He thought of her as he said to Molly,—

"How pleased she would have been!" But Molly thought of the poor young widow upstairs. Aimée was her "she" at the first moment. Presently,—but it seemed a long long time first,—she heard the quick prompt sounds which told of her father's arrival. In he came—to the room as yet only lighted by the fitful blaze of the fire.

CHAPTER XXV.

MOLLY GIBSON'S WORTH IS DISCOVERED.

Mr. Gibson came in rubbing his hands after his frosty ride. Molly judged from the look in his eye that he had been fully informed of the present state of things at the Hall by some one. But he simply went up to and greeted the squire, and waited to hear what was said to him. The squire was fumbling at the taper on the writing-table, and before he answered much he lighted it, and signing to his friend to follow him, he went softly to the sofa and showed him the sleeping child, taking the utmost care not to arouse it by flare or sound.

"Well! this is a fine young gentleman," said Mr. Gibson, returning to the fire rather sooner than the squire expected. "And you've got the mother here, I understand. Mrs. Osborne Hamley, as we must call her, poor thing! It's a sad coming home to her; for I hear she knew nothing of his death." He spoke without exactly addressing any one, so that either Molly or the squire might answer as they liked. The squire said,—

"Yes! She's felt it a terrible shock. She's upstairs in the best bedroom. I should like you to see her, Gibson, if she'll let you. We must do our duty by her, for my poor lad's sake. I wish he could have seen his boy lying there; I do. I daresay it preyed on him to have to keep it all to himself. He might ha' known me, though. He might ha' known my bark was waur than my bite. It's all over now, though; and God forgive me if I was too sharp. I'm punished now."

Molly grew impatient on the mother's behalf.

"Papa, I feel as if she was very ill; perhaps worse than we think. Will you go and see her at once?"

Mr. Gibson followed her upstairs, and the squire came too, thinking that he would do his duty now, and even feeling some self-satisfaction at conquering his desire to stay with the child. They

went into the room where she had been taken. She lay quite still in the same position as at first. Her eyes were open and tearless, fixed on the wall. Mr. Gibson spoke to her, but she did not answer; he lifted her hand to feel her pulse; she never noticed.

"Bring me some wine at once, and order some beef-tea," he said to Molly.

But when he tried to put the wine into her mouth as she lay there on her side, she made no effort to receive or swallow it, and it ran out upon the pillow. Mr. Gibson left the room abruptly; Molly chafed the little inanimate hand; the squire stood by in dumb dismay, touched in spite of himself by the death-in-life of one so young, and who must have been so much beloved.

Mr. Gibson came back two steps at a time; he was carrying the half-awakened child in his arms. He did not scruple to rouse him into yet further wakefulness—did not grieve to hear him begin to wail and cry. His eyes were on the figure upon the bed, which at that sound quivered all through; and when her child was laid at her back, and began caressingly to scramble yet closer, Aimée turned round, and took him in her arms, and lulled him and soothed him with the soft wont of mother's love.

Before she lost this faint consciousness, which was habit or instinct rather than thought, Mr. Gibson spoke to her in French. The child's one word of "maman" had given him this clue. It was the language sure to be most intelligible to her dulled brain; and as it happened,—only Mr. Gibson did not think of that—it was the language in which she had been commanded, and had learnt to obey.

Mr. Gibson's tongue was a little stiff at first, but by-and-by he spoke it with more readiness. He extorted from her short answers at first, then longer ones, and from time to time he plied her with little drops of wine, until some further nourishment should be at hand. Molly was struck by her father's low tones of comfort and sympathy, although she could not follow what was said quickly enough to catch the meaning of what passed.

By-and-by, however, when her father had done all that he could, and they were once more downstairs, he told them more about her journey than they yet knew. The hurry, the sense of acting in defiance of a prohibition, the over-mastering anxiety, the broken night, and fatigue of the journey, had ill prepared her for the shock at last, and Mr. Gibson was seriously alarmed for the

consequences. She had wandered strangely in her replies to him; he had perceived that she was wandering, and had made great efforts to recall her senses; but Mr. Gibson foresaw that some bodily illness was coming on, and stopped late that night, arranging many things with Molly and the squire. One—the only—comfort arising from her state was, the probability that she would be entirely unconscious by the morrow—the day of the funeral. Worn out by the contending emotions of the day, the squire seemed now unable to look beyond the wrench and trial of the next twelve hours. He sate with his head in his hands, declining to go to bed, refusing to dwell on the thought of his grandchild—not three hours ago such a darling in his eyes. Mr. Gibson gave some instructions to one of the maid-servants as to the watch she was to keep by Mrs. Osborne Hamley, and insisted on Molly's going to bed. When she pleaded the apparent necessity of staying up, he said,—

"Now, Molly, look how much less trouble the dear old squire would give if he would obey orders. He is only adding to anxiety by indulging himself. One pardons everything to extreme grief, however. But you will have enough to do to occupy all your strength for days to come; and go to bed you must now. I only wish I saw my way as clearly through other things as I do to your nearest duty. I wish I'd never let Roger go wandering off; he'll wish it too, poor fellow! Did I tell you Cynthia is going off in hot haste to her uncle Kirkpatrick's. I suspect a visit to him will stand in lieu of going out to Russia as a governess."

"I am sure she was quite serious in wishing for that."

"Yes, yes! at the time. I've no doubt she thought she was sincere in intending to go. But the great thing was to get out of the unpleasantness of the present time and place; and uncle Kirkpatrick's will do this as effectually, and more pleasantly, than a situation at Nishni-Novgorod in an ice-palace."

He had given Molly's thoughts a turn, which was what he wanted to do. Molly could not help remembering Mr. Henderson, and his offer, and all the consequent hints; and wondering, and wishing—what did she wish? or had she been falling asleep? Before she had quite ascertained this point she was asleep in reality.

After this, long days passed over in a monotonous round of care; for no one seemed to think of Molly's leaving the Hall during the woeful illness that befell Mrs. Osborne Hamley. It was not

that her father allowed her to take much active part in the nursing; the squire gave him *carte-blanche*, and he engaged two efficient hospital nurses to watch over the unconscious Aimée; but Molly was needed to receive the finer directions as to her treatment and diet. It was not that she was wanted for the care of the little boy; the squire was too jealous of the child's exclusive love for that, and one of the housemaids was employed in the actual physical charge of him; but he needed some one to listen to his incontinence of language, both when his passionate regret for his dead son came uppermost, and also when he had discovered some extraordinary charm in that son's child; and again when he was oppressed with the uncertainty of Aimée's long-continued illness. Molly was not so good or so bewitching a listener to ordinary conversation as Cynthia; but where her heart was interested her sympathy was deep and unfailing. In this case she only wished that the squire could really feel that Aimée was not the encumbrance which he evidently considered her to be. Not that he would have acknowledged the fact, if it had been put before him in plain words. He fought against the dim consciousness of what was in his mind; he spoke repeatedly of patience when no one but himself was impatient; he would often say that, when she grew better, she must not be allowed to leave the Hall until she was perfectly strong, when no one was even contemplating the remotest chance of her leaving her child, excepting only himself. Molly once or twice asked her father if she might not speak to the squire, and represent the hardship of sending her away —the improbability that she would consent to quit her boy, and so on; but Mr. Gibson only replied,—

"Wait quietly. Time enough when nature and circumstance have had their chance, and have failed."

It was well that Molly was such a favourite with the old servants; for she had frequently to restrain and to control. To be sure, she had her father's authority to back her; and they were aware that where her own comfort, ease, or pleasure was concerned she never interfered, but submitted to their will. If the squire had known of the want of attendance to which she submitted with the most perfect meekness, as far as she herself was the only sufferer, he would have gone into a towering rage. But Molly hardly thought of it, so anxious was she to do all she could for others, and to remember the various charges which her father gave her in his daily visits. Perhaps he did not spare her enough; she was willing and

uncomplaining; but, one day, after Mrs. Osborne Hamley had "taken the turn," as the nurses called it, when she was lying weak as a new-born baby, but with her faculties all restored, and her fever gone,—when spring buds were blooming out, and spring birds sang merrily,—Molly answered to her father's sudden questioning, that she felt unaccountably weary; that her head ached heavily, and that she was aware of a sluggishness of thought which it required a painful effort to overcome.

"Don't go on," said Mr. Gibson, with a quick pang of anxiety, almost of remorse. "Lie down here—with your back to the light. I'll come back and see you before I go." And off he went in search of the squire. He had a good long walk before he came upon Mr. Hamley in a field of spring wheat, where the women were weeding, his little grandson holding to his finger in the intervals of short walks of inquiry into the dirtiest places, which was all his sturdy little limbs could manage.

"Well, Gibson, and how goes the patient? Better? I wish we could get her out of doors, such a fine day as it is. It would make her strong as soon as anything. I used to beg my poor lad to come out more. Maybe, I worried him; but the air is the finest thing for strengthening that I know of. Though, perhaps, she'll not thrive in English air as if she'd been born here; and she'll not be quite right till she gets back to her native place, wherever that is."

"I don't know. I begin to think we shall get her quite round here; and I don't know that she could be in a better place. But it's not about her. May I order the carriage for my Molly?" Mr. Gibson's voice sounded as if he was choking a little as he said these last words.

"To be sure," said the squire, setting the child down. He had been holding him in his arms the last few minutes: but now he wanted all his eyes to look into Mr. Gibson's face. "I say," said he, catching hold of Mr. Gibson's arm, "what's the matter, man? Don't twitch up your face like that, but speak!"

"Nothing's the matter," said Mr. Gibson, hastily. "Only I want her at home under my own eye;" and he turned away to go to the house. But the squire left his field and his weeders, and kept at Mr. Gibson's side. He wanted to speak, but his heart was so full he did not know what to say. "I say, Gibson," he got out at last, "your Molly is liker a child of mine than a stranger; and

I reckon we've all on us been coming too hard upon her. You don't think there's much amiss, do you?"

"How can I tell?" said Mr. Gibson, almost savagely. But any hastiness of temper was instinctively understood by the squire; and he was not offended, though he did not speak again till they reached the house. Then he went to order the carriage, and stood by sorrowful enough while the horses were being put in. He felt as if he should not know what to do without Molly; he had never known her value, he thought, till now. But he kept silence on this view of the case; which was a praiseworthy effort on the part of one who usually let by-standers see and hear as much of his passing feelings as if he had had a window in his breast. He stood by while Mr. Gibson helped the faintly-smiling, tearful Molly into the carriage. Then the squire mounted on the step and kissed her hand; but when he tried to thank her and bless her, he broke down; and as soon as he was once more safely on the ground, Mr. Gibson cried out to the coachman to drive on. And so Molly left Hamley Hall. From time to time her father rode up to the window, and made some little cheerful and apparently careless remark. When they came within two miles of Hollingford, he put spurs to his horse, and rode briskly past the carriage windows, kissing his hand to the occupant as he did so. He went on to prepare her home for Molly: when she arrived Mrs. Gibson was ready to greet her. Mr. Gibson had given one or two of his bright, imperative orders, and Mrs. Gibson was feeling rather lonely "without either of her two dear girls at home," as she phrased it, to herself as well as to others.

"Why, my sweet Molly, this is an unexpected pleasure. Only this morning I said to papa, 'When do you think we shall see our Molly back?' He did not say much—he never does, you know; but I am sure he thought directly of giving me this surprise, this pleasure. You're looking a little—what shall I call it? I remember such a pretty line of poetry, 'Oh, call her fair, not pale!' so we'll call you fair."

"You'd better not call her anything, but let her get to her own room and have a good rest as soon as possible. Haven't you got a trashy novel or two in the house? That's the literature to send her to sleep."

He did not leave her till he had seen her laid on a sofa in a darkened room, with some slight pretence of reading in her hand. Then he came away, leading his wife, who turned round at the

door to kiss her hand to Molly, and make a little face of unwillingness to be dragged away.

"Now, Hyacinth," said he, as he took his wife into the drawing-room, "she will need much care. She has been overworked, and I've been a fool. That's all. We must keep her from all worry and care,—but I won't answer for it that she'll not have an illness, for all that!"

"Poor thing! she does look worn out. She is something like me, her feelings are too much for her. But now she is come home she shall find us as cheerful as possible. I can answer for myself; and you really must brighten up your doleful face, my dear—nothing so bad for invalids as the appearance of depression in those around them. I have had such a pleasant letter from Cynthia to-day. Uncle Kirkpatrick really seems to make so much of her, he treats her just like a daughter; he has given her a ticket to the Concerts of Ancient Music; and Mr. Henderson has been to call on her, in spite of all that has gone before."

For an instant, Mr. Gibson thought that it was easy enough for his wife to be cheerful, with the pleasant thoughts and evident anticipations she had in her mind, but a little more difficult for him to put off his doleful looks while his own child lay in a state of suffering and illness which might be the precursor of a still worse malady. But he was always a man for immediate action as soon as he had resolved on the course to be taken; and he knew that "some must watch, while some must sleep, so runs the world away."

The illness which he apprehended came upon Molly; not violently or acutely, so that there was any immediate danger to be dreaded; but making a long pull upon her strength, which seemed to lessen day by day, until at last her father feared that she might become a permanent invalid. There was nothing very decided or alarming to tell Cynthia, and Mrs. Gibson kept the dark side from her in her letters. "Molly was feeling the spring weather;" or "Molly had been a good deal overdone with her stay at the Hall, and was resting;" such little sentences told nothing of Molly's real state. But then, as Mrs. Gibson said to herself, it would be a pity to disturb Cynthia's pleasure by telling her much about Molly; indeed, there was not much to tell, one day was so like another. But it so happened that Lady Harriet, who came whenever she could to sit awhile with Molly, at first against Mrs. Gibson's will, and

afterwards with her full consent,—for reasons of her own, Lady Harriet wrote a letter to Cynthia, to which she was urged by Mrs. Gibson. It fell out in this manner:—One day, when Lady Harriet was sitting in the drawing-room for a few minutes, after she had been with Molly, she said,—

"Really, Clare, I spend so much time in your house that I'm going to establish a work-basket here. Mary has infected me with her notability, and I'm going to work mamma a footstool. It is to be a surprise; and so if I do it here she will know nothing about it. Only I cannot match the gold beads I want for the pansies in this dear little town; and Hollingford, who could send me down stars and planets if I asked him, I make no doubt, could no more match beads than——"

"My dear Lady Harriet! you forget Cynthia! Think what a pleasure it would be to her to do anything for you."

"Would it? Then she shall have plenty of it; but mind, it is you who have answered for her. She shall get me some wool too; how good I am to confer so much pleasure on a fellow-creature! But seriously, do you think I might write and give her a few commissions? Neither Agnes nor Mary are in town——"

"I am sure she would be delighted," said Mrs. Gibson, who also took into consideration the reflection of aristocratic honour that would fall upon Cynthia if she had a letter from Lady Harriet while at Mr. Kirkpatrick's. So she gave the address, and Lady Harriet wrote. All the first part of the letter was taken up with apology and commissions; but then, never doubting but that Cynthia was aware of Molly's state, she went on to say—

"I saw Molly this morning. Twice I have been forbidden admittance, as she was too ill to see any one out of her own family. I wish we could begin to perceive a change for the better; but she looks more fading every time, and I fear Mr. Gibson considers it a very anxious case."

The day but one after this letter was despatched, Cynthia walked into the drawing-room at home with as much apparent composure as if she had left it not an hour before. Mrs. Gibson was dozing, but believing herself to be reading; she had been with Molly the greater part of the morning, and now after her lunch, and the invalid's pretence of early dinner, she considered herself entitled to some repose. She started up as Cynthia came in:

"Cynthia! Dear child, where have you come from? Why

in the world have you come? My poor nerves! My heart is quite fluttering; but, to be sure, it's no wonder with all this anxiety I have to undergo. Why have you come back?"

"Because of the anxiety you speak of, mamma. I never knew,—you never told me how ill Molly was."

"Nonsense! I beg your pardon, my dear, but it's really nonsense. Molly's illness is only nervous, Mr. Gibson says. A nervous fever; but you must remember nerves are mere fancy, and she's getting better. Such a pity for you to have left your uncle's. Who told you about Molly?"

"Lady Harriet. She wrote about some wool——"

"I know,—I know. But you might have known she always exaggerates things. Not but what I have been almost worn out with nursing. Perhaps, after all, it is a very good thing you have come, my dear; and now you shall come down into the dining-room and have some lunch, and tell me all the Hyde Park Street news—into my room,—don't go into yours yet—Molly is so sensitive to noise!"

While Cynthia ate her lunch, Mrs. Gibson went on questioning. "And your aunt, how is her cold? And Helen, quite strong again? Margaretta as pretty as ever? The boys are at Harrow, I suppose? And my old favourite, Mr. Henderson?" She could not manage to slip in this last inquiry naturally; in spite of herself there was a change of tone, an accent of eagerness. Cynthia did not reply on the instant; she poured herself out some water with great deliberation, and then said,—

"My aunt is quite well; Helen is as strong as she ever is, and Margaretta very pretty. The boys are at Harrow, and I conclude that Mr. Henderson is enjoying his usual health, for he was to dine at my uncle's to-day."

"Take care, Cynthia. Look how you are cutting that gooseberry tart," said Mrs. Gibson, with sharp annoyance; not provoked by Cynthia's present action, although it gave excuse for a little vent of temper. "I can't think how you could come off in this sudden kind of way; I am sure it must have annoyed your uncle and aunt. I daresay they'll never ask you again."

"On the contrary, I am to go back there as soon as ever I can be easy to leave Molly."

"'Easy to leave Molly.' Now that really is nonsense, and rather uncomplimentary to me, I must say: nursing her as I have been

doing, daily, and almost nightly ; for I have been wakened times out of number by Mr. Gibson getting up, and going to see if she had had her medicine properly."

"I'm afraid she has been very ill?" asked Cynthia.

"Yes, she has, in one way ; but not in another. It was what I call more a tedious, than an interesting illness. There was no immediate danger, but she lay much in the same state from day to day."

"I wish I had known!" sighed Cynthia. "Do you think I might go and see her now?"

"I'll go and prepare her. You'll find her a good deal better than she has been. Ah; here's Mr. Gibson!" He came into the dining-room, hearing voices. Cynthia thought that he looked much older.

"You here!" said he, coming forward to shake hands. "Why, how did you come?"

"By the 'Umpire.' I never knew Molly had been so ill, or I would have come directly." Her eyes were full of tears. Mr. Gibson was touched; he shook her hand again, and murmured, "You're a good girl, Cynthia."

"She's heard one of dear Lady Harriet's exaggerated accounts," said Mrs. Gibson, "and come straight off. I tell her it's very foolish, for Molly is a great deal better now."

"Very foolish," said Mr. Gibson, echoing his wife's words, but smiling at Cynthia. "But sometimes one likes foolish people for their folly, better than wise people for their wisdom."

"I am afraid folly always annoys me," said his wife. "However, Cynthia is here, and what is done, is done."

"Very true, my dear. And now I'll run up and see my little girl, and tell her the good news. You'd better follow me in a couple of minutes." This to Cynthia.

Molly's delight at seeing her showed itself first in a few happy tears; and then in soft caresses and inarticulate sounds of love. Once or twice she began, "It is such a pleasure," and there she stopped short. But the eloquence of these five words sank deep into Cynthia's heart. She had returned just at the right time, when Molly wanted the gentle fillip of the society of a fresh and yet a familiar person. Cynthia's tact made her talkative or silent, gay or grave, as the varying humour of Molly required. She listened, too, with the semblance, if not the reality, of unwearied

interest, to Molly's continual recurrence to all the time of distress and sorrow at Hamley Hall, and to the scenes which had then so deeply impressed themselves upon her susceptible nature. Cynthia instinctively knew that the repetition of all these painful recollections would ease the oppressed memory, which refused to dwell on anything but what had occurred at a time of feverish disturbance of health. So she never interrupted Molly, as Mrs. Gibson had so frequently done, with—"You told me all that before, my dear. Let us talk of something else;" or, "Really I cannot allow you to be always dwelling on painful thoughts. Try and be a little more cheerful. Youth is gay. You are young, and therefore you ought to be gay. That is put in a famous form of speech; I forget exactly what it is called."

So Molly's health and spirits improved rapidly after Cynthia's return: and although she was likely to retain many of her invalid habits during the summer, she was able to take drives, and enjoy the fine weather; it was only her as yet tender spirits that required a little management. All the Hollingford people forgot that they had ever thought of her except as a darling of the town; and each in his or her way showed kind interest in her father's child. Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe considered it quite a privilege that they were allowed to see her a fortnight or three weeks before any one else; Mrs. Goodenough, spectacles on nose, stirred dainty messes in a silver saucepan for Molly's benefit; the Towers sent books, and forced fruit, and new caricatures, and strange and delicate poultry; humble patients of "the doctor," as Mr. Gibson was usually termed, left the earliest cauliflowers they could grow in their cottage gardens, with "their duty for Miss."

The last of all, though strongest in regard, most piteously eager in interest, came Squire Hamley himself. When she was at the worst, he rode over every day to hear the smallest detail, facing even Mrs. Gibson (his abomination) if her husband was not at home, to ask and hear, and ask and hear, till the tears were unconsciously stealing down his cheeks. Every resource of his heart, or his house, or his lands were searched and tried, if it could bring a moment's pleasure to her; and whatever it might be that came from him, at her very worst time, it brought out a dim smile upon her face.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ABSENT LOVER RETURNS.

And now it was late June; and to Molly's and her father's extreme urgency in pushing, and Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick's affectionate persistency in pulling, Cynthia had yielded, and had gone back to finish her interrupted visit in London, but not before the bruit of her previous sudden return to nurse Molly had told strongly in her favour in the fluctuating opinion of the little town. Her affair with Mr. Preston was thrust into the shade; while every one was speaking of her warm heart. Under the gleam of Molly's recovery everything assumed a rosy hue, as indeed became the time when actual roses were fully in bloom.

One morning Mrs. Gibson brought Molly a great basket of flowers, that had been sent from the Hall. Molly still breakfasted in bed, but she had just come down, and was now well enough to arrange the flowers for the drawing-room, and as she did so with these blossoms, she made some comments on each.

"Ah! these white pinks! They were Mrs. Hamley's favourite flower; and so like her! This little bit of sweetbriar, it quite scents the room. It has pricked my fingers, but never mind. Oh, mamma, look at this rose! I forget its name, but it is very rare, and grows up in the sheltered corner of the wall, near the mulberry-tree. Roger bought the tree for his mother with his own money when he was quite a boy; he showed it me, and made me notice it."

"I daresay it was Roger who got it now. You heard papa say he had seen him yesterday."

"No! Roger! Roger come home!" said Molly, turning first red, then very white.

"Yes. Oh, I remember you had gone to bed before papa came

in, and he was called off early to tiresome Mrs. Beale. Yes, Roger turned up at the Hall the day before yesterday."

But Molly leaned back against her chair, too faint to do more at the flowers for some time. She had been startled by the suddenness of the news. "Roger come home!"

It happened that Mr. Gibson was unusually busy on this particular day, and he did not come home till late in the afternoon. But Molly kept her place in the drawing-room all the time, not ever going to take her customary siesta, so anxious was she to hear everything about Roger's return, which as yet appeared to her almost incredible. But it was quite natural in reality; the long monotony of her illness had made her lose all count of time. When Roger left England, his idea was to coast round Africa on the eastern side until he reached the Cape; and thence to make what further journey or voyage might seem to him best in pursuit of his scientific objects. To Cape Town all his letters had been addressed of late; and there, two months before, he had received the intelligence of Osborne's death, as well as Cynthia's hasty letter of relinquishment. He did not consider that he was doing wrong in returning to England immediately, and reporting himself to the gentlemen who had sent him out, with a full explanation of the circumstances relating to Osborne's private marriage and sudden death. He offered, and they accepted his offer, to go out again for any time that they might think equivalent to the five months he was yet engaged to them for. They were most of them gentlemen of property, and saw the full importance of proving the marriage of an eldest son, and installing his child as the natural heir to a long-descended estate. This much information, but in a more condensed form, Mr. Gibson gave to Molly, in a very few minutes. She sat up on her sofa, looking very pretty with the flush on her cheeks, and the brightness in her eyes.

"Well!" said she, when her father stopped speaking.

"Well! what?" asked he, playfully.

"Oh! why, such a number of things. I've been waiting all day to ask you all about everything. How is he looking?"

"If a young man of twenty-four ever does take to growing taller, I should say that he was taller. As it is, I suppose it's only that he looks broader, stronger—more muscular."

"Oh! is he changed?" asked Molly, a little disturbed by this account.

"No, not changed ; and yet not the same. He's as brown as a berry for one thing ; caught a little of the negro tinge, and a beard as fine and sweeping as my bay-mare's tail."

"A beard! But go on, papa. Does he talk as he used to do? I should know his voice amongst ten thousand."

"I didn't catch any Hottentot twang, if that's what you mean. Nor did he say, 'Cæsar and Pompey berry much alike, 'specially Pompey,' which is the only specimen of negro language I can remember just at this moment."

"And which I never could see the wit of," said Mrs. Gibson, who had come into the room after the conversation had begun; and did not understand what it was aiming at. Molly fidgeted ; she wanted to go on with her questions and keep her father to definite and matter-of-fact answers, and she knew that when his wife chimed into a conversation, Mr. Gibson was very apt to find out that he must go about some necessary piece of business.

"Tell me, how are they all getting on together?" It was an inquiry which she did not make in general before Mrs. Gibson, for Molly and her father had tacitly agreed to keep silence on what they knew or had observed, respecting the three who formed the present family at the Hall.

"Oh!" said Mr. Gibson, "Roger is evidently putting everything to rights in his firm, quiet way."

"'Things to rights.' Why, what's wrong?" asked Mrs. Gibson quickly. "The squire and the French daughter-in-law don't get on well together, I suppose? I am always so glad Cynthia acted with the promptitude she did ; it would have been very awkward for her to have been mixed up with all these complications. Poor Roger! to find himself supplanted by a child when he comes home!"

"You were not in the room, my dear, when I was telling Molly of the reasons for Roger's return ; it was to put his brother's child at once into his rightful and legal place. So now, when he finds the work partly done to his hands, he is happy and gratified in proportion."

"Then he is not much affected by Cynthia's breaking off her engagement?" (Mrs. Gibson could afford to call it an "engagement" now.) "I never did give him credit for very deep feelings."

"On the contrary, he feels it very acutely. He and I had a long talk about it, yesterday."

Both Molly and Mrs. Gibson would have liked to have heard

something more about this conversation ; but Mr. Gibson did not choose to go on with the subject. The only point which he disclosed was, that Roger had insisted on his right to have a personal interview with Cynthia ; and, on hearing that she was in London at present, had deferred any further explanation or expostulation by letter, preferring to await her return.

Molly went on with her questions on other subjects. "And Mrs. Osborne Hamley? How is she?"

"Wonderfully brightened up by Roger's presence. I don't think I have ever seen her smile before ; but she gives him the sweetest smiles from time to time. They are evidently good friends; and she loses her strange startled look when she speaks to him. I suspect she has been quite aware of the squire's wish that she should return to France; and has been hard put to it to decide whether to leave her child or not. The idea that she would have to make some such decision came upon her when she was completely shattered by grief and illness, and she hasn't had any one to consult as to her duty until Roger came, upon whom she has evidently firm reliance. He told me something of this himself."

"You seem to have had quite a long conversation with him, papa!"

"Yes. I was going to see old Abraham, when the squire called to me over the hedge, as I was jogging along. He told me the news; and there was no resisting his invitation to come back and lunch with them. Besides, one gets a great deal of meaning out of Roger's words; it did not take so very long a time to hear this much."

"I should think he would come and call upon us soon," said Mrs. Gibson to Molly, "and then we shall see how much we can manage to hear."

"Do you think he will, papa?" said Molly, more doubtfully. She remembered the last time he was in that very room, and the hopes with which he left it ; and she fancied that she could see traces of this thought in her father's countenance at his wife's speech.

"I can't tell, my dear. Until he's quite convinced of Cynthia's intentions, it can't be very pleasant for him to come on mere visits of ceremony to the house in which he has known her ; but he's one who will always do what he thinks right, whether pleasant or not."

Mrs. Gibson could hardly wait till her husband had finished his sentence before she testified against a part of it.

"Convinced of Cynthia's intentions! I should think she had made them pretty clear! What more does the man want?"

"He's not as yet convinced that the letter wasn't written in a fit of temporary feeling. I've told him that this was true; although I didn't feel it my place to explain to him the causes of that feeling. He believes that he can induce her to resume the former footing. I don't; and I've told him so; but, of course, he needs the full conviction that she alone can give him."

"Poor Cynthia! My poor child!" said Mrs. Gibson, plaintively. "What she has exposed herself to by letting herself be over-persuaded by that man!"

Mr. Gibson's eyes flashed fire. But he kept his lips tight closed; and only said, "That man, indeed!" quite below his breath.

Molly, too, had been damped by an expression or two in her father's speech. "Mere visits of ceremony!" Was it so, indeed? A "mere visit of ceremony!" Whatever it was, the call was paid before many days were over. That he felt all the awkwardness of his position towards Mrs. Gibson—that he was in reality suffering pain all the time—was but too evident to Molly; but of course Mrs. Gibson saw nothing of this in her gratification at the proper respect paid to her by one whose name was in the newspapers that chronicled his return, and about whom already Lord Cumnor and the Towers family had been making inquiry.

Molly was sitting in her pretty white invalid's dress, half reading, half dreaming, for the June air was so clear and ambient, the garden so full of bloom, the trees so full of leaf, that reading by the open window was only a pretence at such a time; besides which, Mrs. Gibson continually interrupted her with remarks about the pattern of her worsted work. It was after lunch—orthodox calling time, when Maria ushered in Mr. Roger Hamley. Molly started up; and then stood shyly and quietly in her place while a bronzed, bearded, grave man came into the room, in whom she at first had to seek for the merry boyish face she knew by heart only two years ago. But months in the climates in which Roger had been travelling age as much as years in more temperate regions. And constant thought and anxiety, while in daily peril of life, deepen the lines of character upon the face. Moreover, the circumstances that had of late affected him personally were not of a nature

to make him either buoyant or cheerful. But his voice was the same; that was the first point of the old friend Molly caught, when he addressed her in a tone far softer than he used in speaking conventional politenesses to her stepmother.

"I was so sorry to hear how ill you had been! You are looking but delicate!" letting his eyes rest upon her face with affectionate examination. Molly felt herself colour all over with the consciousness of his regard. To do something to put an end to it, she looked up, and shewed him her beautiful soft grey eyes, which he never remembered to have noticed before. She smiled at him as she blushed still deeper, and said,—

"Oh! I am quite strong now to what I was. It would be a shame to be ill when everything is in its full summer beauty."

"I have heard how deeply we—I am indebted to you—my father can hardly praise you ——"

"Please don't," said Molly, the tears coming into her eyes in spite of herself. He seemed to understand her at once; he went on as if speaking to Mrs. Gibson: "Indeed, my little sister-in-law is never weary of talking about Monsieur le Docteur, as she calls your husband!"

"I have not had the pleasure of making Mrs. Osborne Hamley's acquaintance yet," said Mrs. Gibson, suddenly aware of a duty which might have been expected from her, "and I must beg you to apologize to her for my remissness. But Molly has been such a care and anxiety to me—for, you know, I look upon her quite as my own child—that I really have not gone anywhere, excepting to the Towers, perhaps I should say, which is just like another home to me. And then I understood that Mrs. Osborne Hamley was thinking of returning to France before long? Still it was very remiss."

The little trap thus set for news of what might be going on in the Hamley family was quite successful. Roger answered her thus:—

"I am sure Mrs. Osborne Hamley will be very glad to see any friends of the family, as soon as she is a little stronger. I hope she will not go back to France at all. She is an orphan, and I trust we shall induce her to remain with my father. But at present nothing is arranged." Then, as if glad to have got over his "visit of ceremony," he got up and took leave. When he was at the door he looked back, having, as he thought, a word more to say; but he

quite forgot what it was, for he surprised Molly's intent gaze, and sudden confusion at discovery, and went away as soon as he could.

"Poor Osborne was right!" said he. "She has grown into delicate fragrant beauty, just as he said she would: or is it the character which has formed her face? Now the next time I enter these doors, it will be to learn my fate!"

Mr. Gibson had told his wife of Roger's desire to have a personal interview with Cynthia, rather with a view to her repeating what he said to her daughter. He did not see any exact necessity for this, it is true; but he thought it might be advisable that she should know all the truth in which she was concerned, and he told his wife this. But she took the affair into her own management, and, although she apparently agreed with Mr. Gibson, she never named the affair to Cynthia; all that she said to her was—

"Your old admirer, Roger Hamley, has come home in a great hurry, in consequence of poor dear Osborne's unexpected decease. He must have been rather surprised to find the widow and her little boy established at the Hall. He came to call here the other day, and made himself really rather agreeable, although his manners are not improved by the society he has kept on his travels. Still I prophesy he will be considered as a fashionable 'lion,' and perhaps the very uncouthness which jars against my sense of refinement, may even become admired in a scientific traveller, who has been into more desert places, and eaten more extraordinary food, than any other Englishman of the day. I suppose he has given up all chance of inheriting the estate, for I hear he talks of returning to Africa, and becoming a regular wanderer. Your name was not mentioned, but I believe he inquired about you from Mr. Gibson."

"There!" said she to herself, as she folded up and directed her letter. "That can't disturb her, or make her uncomfortable. And it's all the truth too, or very near it. Of course he'll want to see her when she comes back; but by that time I do hope Mr. Henderson will have proposed again, and that that affair will be all settled."

But Cynthia returned to Hollingford one Tuesday morning, and in answer to her mother's anxious inquiries on the subject, would only say that Mr. Henderson had not offered again. Why should he? She had refused him once, and he did not know the reason of her refusal, at least one of the reasons. She did not know if she should have taken him if there had been no such person as Roger Hamley in the world. No! Uncle and aunt Kirkpatrick had never

heard anything about Roger's offer,—nor had her cousins. She had always declared her wish to keep it a secret, and she had not mentioned it to any one, whatever other people might have done." Underneath this light and careless vein there were other feelings; but Mrs. Gibson was not one to probe beneath the surface. She had set her heart on Mr. Henderson's marrying Cynthia, very early in their acquaintance; and to know, firstly, that the same wish had entered into his head, and that Roger's attachment to Cynthia, with its consequences, had been the obstacle; and secondly, that Cynthia herself with all the opportunities of propinquity which she had lately had, had failed to provoke a repetition of the offer,—was, as Mrs. Gibson said, "enough to provoke a saint." All the rest of the day she alluded to Cynthia as a disappointing and ungrateful daughter; Molly could not make out why, and resented it for Cynthia, until the latter said, bitterly, "Never mind, Molly. Mamma is only vexed because Mr.—— because I have not come back an engaged young lady."

"Yes; and I am sure you might have done,—there's the ingratitude! I am not so unjust as to want you to do what you can't do!" said Mrs. Gibson, querulously.

"But where's the ingratitude, mamma? I'm very much tired, and perhaps that makes me stupid; but I cannot see the ingratitude." Cynthia spoke very wearily, leaning her head back on the sofa-cushions, as if she did not care to have an answer.

"Why, don't you see we are doing all we can for you; dressing you well, and sending you to London; and when you might relieve us of the expense of all this, you don't."

"No! Cynthia, I will speak," said Molly, all crimson with indignation, and pushing away Cynthia's restraining hand. "I am sure papa does not feel, and does not mind, any expense he incurs about his daughters. And I know quite well that he does not wish us to marry, unless ——" She faltered and stopped.

"Unless what?" said Mrs. Gibson, half-mocking.

"Unless we love some one very dearly indeed," said Molly, in a low, firm tone.

"Well, after this tirade—really rather indelicate, I must say—I have done. I will neither help nor hinder any love-affairs of you two young ladies. In my days we were glad of the advice of our elders." And she left the room to put into fulfilment an idea which had just struck her: to write a confidential letter to Mrs. Kirk-

patrick, giving her her version of Cynthia's "unfortunate entanglement," and "delicate sense of honour," and hints of her entire indifference to all the masculine portion of the world, Mr. Henderson being dexterously excluded from the category.

"Oh, dear!" said Molly, throwing herself back in a chair, with a sigh of relief, as Mrs. Gibson left the room; "how cross I do get since I've been ill! But I couldn't bear her to speak as if papa grudged you anything."

"I'm sure he doesn't, Molly. You need not defend him on my account. But I'm sorry mamma still looks upon me as 'an encumbrance,' as the advertisements in *The Times* always call us unfortunate children. But I've been an encumbrance to her all my life. I'm getting very much into despair about everything, Molly. I shall try my luck in Russia. I've heard of a situation as English governess at Moscow, in a family owning whole provinces of land, and serfs by the hundred. I put off writing my letter till I came home; I shall be as much out of the way there as if I was married. Oh, dear! travelling all night isn't good for the spirits. How's Mr. Preston?"

"Oh, he has taken Cumnor Grange, three miles away, and he never comes in to the Hollingford tea-parties now. I saw him once in the street, but it's a question which of us tried the hardest to get out of the other's way."

"You've not said anything about Roger, yet."

"No; I didn't know if you would care to hear. He is very much older-looking; quite a strong grown-up man. And papa says he is much graver. Ask me any questions, if you want to know, but I have only seen him once."

"I was in hopes he would have left the neighbourhood by this time. Mamma said he was going to travel again."

"I can't tell," said Molly. "I suppose you know," she continued, but hesitating a little before she spoke, "that he wishes to see you?"

"No! I never heard. I wish he would have been satisfied with my letter. It was as decided as I could make it. If I say I won't see him, I wonder if his will or mine will be the strongest?"

"His," said Molly. "But you must see him; you owe it to him. He will never be satisfied without it."

"Suppose he talks me round into resuming the engagement? I should only break it off again."

"Surely, you can't be 'talked round,' if your mind is made up. But perhaps it is not really, Cynthia?" asked she, with a little wistful anxiety betraying itself in her face.

"It is quite made up. I am going to teach little Russian girls; and am never going to marry nobody."

"You are not serious, Cynthia. And yet it is a very serious thing."

But Cynthia went into one of her wild moods, and no more reason or sensible meaning was to be got out of her at the time.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE, AND ON WITH THE NEW."

The next morning saw Mrs. Gibson in a much more contented frame of mind. She had written and posted her letter, and the next thing was to keep Cynthia in what she called a reasonable state, or, in other words, to try and cajole her into docility. But it was so much labour lost. Cynthia had already received a letter from Mr. Henderson before she came down to breakfast,—a declaration of love, a proposal of marriage as clear as words could make it; together with an intimation that, unable to wait for the slow delays of the post, he was going to follow her down to Hollingford, and would arrive at the same time that she had done herself on the previous day. Cynthia said nothing about this letter to any one. She came late into the breakfast-room, after Mr. and Mrs. Gibson had finished the actual business of the meal; but her unpunctuality was quite accounted for by the fact that she had been travelling all the night before. Molly was not as yet strong enough to get up so early. Cynthia hardly spoke, and did not touch her food. Mr. Gibson went about his daily business, and Cynthia and her mother were left alone.

"My dear," said Mrs. Gibson, "you are not eating your breakfast as you should do. I am afraid our meals seem very plain and homely to you after those in Hyde Park Street?"

"No," said Cynthia; "I'm not hungry, that's all."

"If we were as rich as your uncle, I should feel it to be both a duty and a pleasure to keep an elegant table; but limited means are a sad clog to one's wishes. I don't suppose that, work as he will, Mr. Gibson can earn more than he does at present; while the capabilities of the law are boundless. Lord Chancellor! Titles as well as fortune!"

Cynthia was almost too much absorbed in her own reflections to reply, but she did say,—

"Hundreds of briefless barristers. Take the other side, mamma."

"Well; but I have noticed that many of these have private fortunes."

"Perhaps. Mamma, I expect Mr. Henderson will come and call this morning."

"Oh, my precious child! But how do you know? My darling Cynthia, am I to congratulate you?"

"No! I suppose I must tell you. I have had a letter this morning from him, and he is coming down by the 'Umpire' to-day."

"But he has offered? He surely must mean to offer, at any rate?"

Cynthia played with her teaspoon before she replied; then she looked up, like one startled from a dream, and caught the echo of her mother's question.

"Offered! yes, I suppose he has."

"And you accept him? Say 'yes,' Cynthia, and make me happy!"

"I shan't say 'yes' to make any one happy except myself, and the Russian scheme has great charms for me." She said this to plague her mother, and lessen Mrs. Gibson's exuberance of joy, it must be confessed; for her mind was pretty well made up. But it did not affect Mrs. Gibson, who affixed even less truth to it than there really was. The idea of a residence in a new, strange country, among new, strange people, was not without allurement to Cynthia.

"You always look nice, dear; but don't you think you had better put on that pretty lilac silk?"

"I shall not vary a thread or a shred from what I have got on now."

"You dear, wilful creature! you know you always look lovely in whatever you put on." So, kissing her daughter, Mrs. Gibson left the room, intent on the lunch which should impress Mr. Henderson at once with an idea of family refinement.

Cynthia went upstairs to Molly; she was inclined to tell her about Mr. Henderson, but she found it impossible to introduce the subject naturally, so she left it to time to reveal the future as gradually as it might. Molly was tired with a bad night; and her

father, in his flying visit to his darling before going out, had advised her to stay upstairs for the greater part of the morning, and to keep quiet in her own room till after her early dinner, so Time had not a fair chance of telling her what he had in store in his budget. Mrs. Gibson sent an apology to Molly for not paying her her usual morning visit, and told Cynthia to give Mr. Henderson's probable coming as a reason for her occupation downstairs. But Cynthia did no such thing. She kissed Molly, and sate silently by her, holding her hand; till at length she jumped up, and said, "You shall be left alone now, little one. I want you to be very well and very bright this afternoon: so rest now." And Cynthia left her, and went to her own room, locked the door, and began to think.

Some one was thinking about her at the same time, and it was not Mr. Henderson. Roger had heard from Mr. Gibson that Cynthia had come home, and he was resolving to go to her at once, and have one strong, manly attempt to overcome the obstacles, whatever they might be—and of their nature he was not fully aware—that she had conjured up against the continuance of their relation to each other. He left his father—he left them all—and went off into the woods, to be alone until the time came when he might mount his horse and ride over to put his fate to the touch. He was as careful as ever not to interfere with the morning hours that were tabooed to him of old; but waiting was very hard work when he knew that she was so near, and the time so near at hand.

Yet he rode slowly, compelling himself to quietness and patience when he was once really on the way to her.

"Mrs. Gibson at home? Miss Kirkpatrick?" he asked of the servant, Maria, who opened the door. She was confused, but he did not notice it.

"I think so—I'm not sure! Will you walk up into the drawing-room, sir? Miss Gibson is there, I know."

So he went upstairs, all his nerves on the strain for the coming interview with Cynthia. It was either a relief or a disappointment, he was not sure which, to find only Molly in the room:—Molly, half lying on the couch in the bow-window which commanded the garden; draped in soft white drapery, very white herself, and a laced half-handkerchief tied over her head to save her from any ill effects of the air that blew in through the open window. He was so ready to speak to Cynthia that he hardly knew what to say to any one else.

"I'm afraid you are not so well," he said to Molly, who sat up to receive him, and who suddenly began to tremble with emotion.

"I'm a little tired, that's all," said she; and then she was quite silent, hoping that he might go, and yet somehow wishing him to stay. But he took a chair and placed it near her, opposite to the window. He thought that surely Maria would tell Miss Kirkpatrick that she was wanted, and that at any moment he might hear her light quick footstep on the stairs. He thought he ought to talk, but he could not think of anything to say. The pink flush came out on Molly's cheeks; once or twice she was on the point of speaking, but again she thought better of it; and the pauses between their faint disjointed remarks became longer and longer. Suddenly, in one of these pauses, the merry murmur of distant happy voices in the garden came nearer and nearer; Molly looked more and more uneasy and flushed, and in spite of herself kept watching Roger's face. He could see over her into the garden. A sudden deep colour overspread him, as if his heart had sent its blood out coursing at full gallop. Cynthia and Mr. Henderson had come in sight; he eagerly talking to her as he bent forward to look into her face; she, her looks half averted in pretty shyness, was evidently coquetting about some flowers, which she either would not give, or would not take. Just then, for the lovers had emerged from the shrubbery into comparatively public life, Maria was seen approaching; apparently she had feminine tact enough to induce Cynthia to leave her present admirer, and to go a few steps to meet her to receive the whispered message that Mr. Roger Hamley was there, and wished to speak to her. Roger could see her startled gesture; she turned back to say something to Mr. Henderson before coming towards the house. Now Roger spoke to Molly—spoke hurriedly, spoke hoarsely.

"Molly, tell me! Is it too late for me to speak to Cynthia? I came on purpose. Who is that man?"

"Mr. Henderson. He only came to-day—but now he is her accepted lover. Oh, Roger, forgive me the pain!"

"Tell her I have been, and am gone. Send out word to her. Don't let her be interrupted."

And Roger ran downstairs at full speed, and Molly heard the passionate clang of the outer door. He had hardly left the house before Cynthia entered the room, pale and resolute.

CYNTHIA'S LAST LOVER

"Where is he?" she said, looking around, as if he might yet be hidden.

"Gone!" said Molly, very faint.

"Gone. Oh, what a relief! It seems to be my fate never to be off with the old lover before I am on with the new, and yet I did write as decidedly as I could. Why, Molly, what's the matter?" for now Molly had fainted away utterly. Cynthia flew to the bell, summoned Maria, water, salts, wine, anything; and as soon as Molly, gasping and miserable, became conscious again, she wrote a little pencil-note to Mr. Henderson, bidding him return to the George, whence he had come in the morning, and saying that if he obeyed her at once, he might be allowed to call again in the evening, otherwise she would not see him till the next day. This she sent down by Maria, and the unlucky man never believed but that it was Miss Gibson's sudden indisposition in the first instance that had deprived him of his charmer's company. He comforted himself for the long solitary afternoon by writing to tell all his friends of his happiness, and amongst them uncle and aunt Kirkpatrick, who received his letter by the same post as that discreet epistle of Mrs. Gibson's, which she had carefully arranged to reveal as much as she wished, and no more.

"Was he very terrible?" asked Cynthia, as she sate with Molly in the stillness of Mrs. Gibson's dressing-room.

"Oh, Cynthia, it was such pain to see him, he suffered so!"

"I don't like people of deep feelings," said Cynthia, pouting. "They don't suit me. Why couldn't he let me go without this fuss? I'm not worth his caring for!"

"You've the happy gift of making people love you. Remember Mr. Preston,—he too wouldn't give up hope."

"Now I won't have you classing Roger Hamley and Mr. Preston together in the same sentence. One was as much too bad for me as the other is too good. Now I hope that man in the garden is the *juste milieu*,—I'm that myself, for I don't think I'm vicious, and I know I'm not virtuous."

"Do you really like him enough to marry him?" asked Molly earnestly. "Do think, Cynthia. It won't do to go on throwing your lovers off; you give pain that I'm sure you do not mean to do,—that you cannot understand."

"Perhaps I can't. I'm not offended. I never set up for what I am not, and I know I'm not constant. I've told Mr.

Henderson so ——" She stopped, blushing and smiling at the recollection.

"You have! and what did he say?"

"That he liked me just as I was; so you see he's fairly warned. Only he's a little afraid, I suppose,—for he wants me to be married very soon, almost directly, in fact. But I don't know if I shall give way,—you hardly saw him, Molly,—but he's coming again to-night, and mind, I'll never forgive you if you don't think him very charming. I believe I cared for him when he offered all those months ago, but I tried to think I didn't; only sometimes I really was so unhappy, I thought I must put an iron band round my heart to keep it from breaking, like the Faithful John of the German story,—do you remember, Molly?—how when his master came to his crown and his fortune and his ladylove, after innumerable trials and disgraces, and was driving away from the church where he'd been married in a coach and six, with Faithful John behind, the happy couple heard three great cracks in succession, and on inquiring, they were the iron-bands round his heart, that Faithful John had worn all during the time of his master's tribulation, to keep it from breaking."

In the evening Mr. Henderson came. Molly had been very curious to see him; and when she saw him she was not sure whether she liked him or not. He was handsome, without being conceited; gentlemanly, without being foolishly fine. He talked easily, and never said a silly thing. He was perfectly well-appointed, yet never seemed to have given a thought to his dress. He was good-tempered and kind; not without some of the cheerful flippancy of repartee which belonged to his age and profession, and which his age and profession are apt to take for wit. But he wanted something in Molly's eyes—at any rate, in this first interview, and in her heart of hearts she thought him rather commonplace. But of course she said nothing of this to Cynthia, who was evidently as happy as she could be. Mrs. Gibson, too, was in the seventh heaven of ecstasy, and spoke but little; but what she did say, expressed the highest sentiments in the finest language. Mr. Gibson was not with them for long, but while he was there he was evidently studying the unconscious Mr. Henderson with his dark penetrating eyes. Mr. Henderson behaved exactly as he ought to have done to everybody: respectful to Mr. Gibson, deferential to Mrs. Gibson, friendly to Molly, devoted to Cynthia.

The next time Mr. Gibson found Molly alone, he began,—"Well! and how do you like the new relation that is to be?"

"It's difficult to say. I think he's very nice in all his bits, but —rather dull on the whole."

"I think him perfection," said Mr. Gibson, to Molly's surprise; but in an instant afterwards she saw that he had been speaking ironically. He went on. "I don't wonder she preferred him to Roger Hamley. Such scents! such gloves! And then his hair and his cravat!"

"Now, papa, you're not fair. He's a great deal more than that. One could see that he had very good feeling; and he's very handsome, and very much attached to her."

"So was Roger. However, I must confess I shall be only too glad to have her married. She's a girl who'll always have some love-affair on hand, and will always be apt to slip through a man's fingers if he doesn't look sharp; as I was saying to Roger ——"

"You have seen him, then, since he was here?"

"Met him in the street."

"How was he?"

"I don't suppose he'd been going through the pleasantest thing in the world; but he'll get over it before long. He spoke with sense and resignation, and didn't say much about it; but one could see that he was feeling it pretty sharply. He's had three months to think it over, remember. The squire, I should guess, is showing more indignation. He is boiling over, that any one should reject his son. The enormity of the sin never seems to have been apparent to him till now, when he sees how Roger is affected by it. Indeed, with the exception of myself, I don't know one reasonable father; eh, Molly?"

Whatever else Mr. Henderson might be, he was an impatient lover; he wanted to marry Cynthia directly—next week—the week after. At any rate before the long vacation, so that they could go abroad at once. Trousseaux, and preliminary ceremonies, he gave to the winds. Mr. Gibson, generous as usual, called Cynthia aside a morning or two after her engagement, and put a hundred-pound note into her hands.

"There! that's to pay your expenses to Russia and back. I hope you'll find your pupils obedient."

To his surprise, and rather to his discomfiture, Cynthia threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"You are the kindest person I know," said she ; and I don't know how to thank you in words."

"If you tumble my shirt-collars again in that way, I'll charge you for the washing. Just now, too, when I'm trying so hard to be trim and elegant, like your Mr. Henderson."

"But you do like him, don't you?" said Cynthia, pleadingly. "He does so like you."

"Of course. We're all angels just now, and you're an archangel. I hope he'll wear as well as Roger."

Cynthia looked grave. "That was a very silly affair," she said. "We were two as unsuitable people ——"

"It has ended, and that's enough. Besides, I've no more time to waste; and there's your smart young man coming here in all haste."

Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick sent all manner of congratulations; and Mrs. Gibson, in a private letter, assured Mrs. Kirkpatrick that her ill-timed confidence about Roger should be considered as quite private. For as soon as Mr. Henderson had made his appearance in Hollingford, she had written a second letter, entreating them not to allude to anything she might have said in her first; which she said was written in such excitement on discovering the real state of her daughter's affections, that she had hardly known what she said, and had exaggerated some things, and misunderstood others: all that she did know now was, that Mr. Henderson had just proposed to Cynthia, and was accepted, and that they were as happy as the day was long, and ("excuse the vanity of a mother,") made a most lovely couple. So Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick wrote back an equally agreeable letter, praising Mr. Henderson, admiring Cynthia, and generally congratulatory ; insisting into the bargain that the marriage should take place from their house in Hyde Park Street, and that Mr. and Mrs. Gibson and Molly should all come up and pay them a visit. There was a little postscript at the end. "Surely you do not mean the famous traveller, Hamley, about whose discoveries all our scientific men are so much excited. You speak of him as a young Hamley, who went to Africa. Answer this question, pray, for Helen is most anxious to know." This P.S. being in Helen's handwriting. In her exultation at the general success of everything, and desire for sympathy, Mrs. Gibson read parts of this letter to Molly; the postscript among the rest. It made a deeper impression on Molly than even the proposed kindness of the visit to London.

There were some family consultations; but the end of them all was that the Kirkpatrick invitation was accepted. There were many small reasons for this, which were openly acknowledged; but there was one general and unspoken wish to have the ceremony performed out of the immediate neighbourhood of the two men whom Cynthia had previously rejected; that was the word now to be applied to her treatment of them. So Molly was ordered and enjoined and entreated to become strong as soon as possible, in order that her health might not prevent her attending the marriage; Mr. Gibson himself, though he thought it his duty to damp the excellent anticipations of his wife and her daughter, being not at all averse to the prospect of going to London, and seeing half-a-dozen old friends, and many scientific exhibitions, independently of the very fair amount of liking which he had for his host, Mr. Kirkpatrick himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BRIDAL VISITS AND ADIEUX.

The whole town of Hollingford came to congratulate and inquire into particulars. Some indeed—Mrs. Goodenough at the head of this class of malcontents—thought that they were defrauded of their right to a fine show by Cynthia's being married in London. Even Lady Cumnor was moved into action. She, who had hardly ever paid calls "out of her own sphere," who had only once been to see "Clare" in her own house—she came to congratulate after her fashion. Maria had only just time to run up into the drawing-room one morning, and say,—

"Please, ma'am, the great carriage from the Towers is coming up to the gate, and my lady the Countess is sitting inside." It was but eleven o'clock, and Mrs. Gibson would have been indignant at any commoner who had ventured to call at such an untimely hour, but in the case of the Peerage the rules of domestic morality were relaxed.

The family "stood at arms," as it were, till Lady Cumnor appeared in the drawing-room ; and then she had to be settled in the best chair, and the light adjusted before anything like conversation began. She was the first to speak; and Lady Harriet, who had begun a few words to Molly, dropped into silence.

"I have been taking Mary—Lady Cuxhaven—to the railway station on this new line between Birmingham and London, and I thought I would come on here, and offer you my congratulations. Clare, which is the young lady?"—putting on her glasses, and looking at Cynthia and Molly, who were dressed pretty much alike. "I did not think it would be amiss to give you a little advice, my dear," said she, when Cynthia had been properly pointed out to her as bride elect. "I have heard a good deal about you; and I am

only too glad, for your mother's sake,—your mother is a very worthy woman, and did her duty very well while she was in our family—I am truly rejoiced, I say, to hear that you are going to make so creditable a marriage. I hope it will efface your former errors of conduct—which we will hope were but trivial in reality—and that you will live to be a comfort to your mother,—for whom both Lord Cumnor and I entertain a very sincere regard. But you must conduct yourself with discretion in whatever state of life it pleases God to place you, whether married or single. You must reverence your husband, and conform to his opinion in all things. Look up to him as your head, and do nothing without consulting him."—It was as well that Lord Cumnor was not amongst the audience ; or he might have compared precept with practice.—"Keep strict accounts; and remember your station in life. I understand that Mr. ——" looking about for some help as to the name she had forgotten——"Henderson—Henderson is in the law. Although there is a general prejudice against attorneys, I have known two or three who are very respectable men ; and I am sure Mr. Henderson is one, or your good mother and our old friend Gibson would not have sanctioned the engagement."

"He's a barrister," put in Cynthia, unable to restrain herself any longer. "Barrister-at-law."

"Ah, yes. Attorney-at-law. Barrister-at-law. I understand without your speaking so loud, my dear. What was I going to say before you interrupted me? When you have been a little in society you will find that it is reckoned bad manners to interrupt. I had a great deal more to say to you, and you have put it all out of my head. There was something else your father wanted me to ask—what was it, Harriet?"

"I suppose you mean about Mr. Hamley?"

"Oh, yes! we are intending to have the house full of Lord Hollingford's friends next month, and Lord Cumnor is particularly anxious to secure Mr. Hamley."

"The squire?" asked Mrs. Gibson in some surprise. Lady Cumnor bowed slightly, as much as to say, "If you did not interrupt me I should explain."

"The famous traveller—the scientific Mr. Hamley, I mean. I imagine he is son to the squire. Lord Hollingford knows him well; but when we asked him before, he declined coming, and assigned no reason."

Had Roger indeed been asked to the Towers and declined? Mrs. Gibson could not understand it. Lady Cumnor went on—

"Now this time we are particularly anxious to secure him, and my son Lord Hollingford will not return to England until the very week before the Duke of Atherstone is coming to us. I believe Mr. Gibson is very intimate with Mr. Hamley; do you think he could induce him to favour us with his company?"

And this from the proud Lady Cumnor; and the object of it Roger Hamley, whom she had all but turned out of her drawing-room two years ago for calling at an untimely hour; and whom Cynthia had turned out of her heart. Mrs. Gibson was surprised, and could only murmur out that she was sure Mr. Gibson would do all that her ladyship wished.

"Thank you. You know me well enough to be aware that I am not the person, nor is the Towers the house, to go about soliciting guests. But in this instance I bend my head; high rank should always be the first to honour those who have distinguished themselves by art or science."

"Besides, mamma," said Lady Harriet, "papa was saying that the Hamleys have been on their land since before the Conquest; while we only came into the county a century ago; and there is a tale that the first Cumnor began his fortune through selling tobacco in King James's reign."

If Lady Cumnor did not exactly shift her trumpet and take snuff there on the spot, she behaved in an equivalent manner. She began a low-toned but nevertheless authoritative conversation with Clare about the details of the wedding, which lasted until she thought it fit to go, when she abruptly plucked Lady Harriet up, and carried her off in the very midst of a description she was giving to Cynthia about the delights of Spa, which was to be one of the resting-places of the newly-married couple on their wedding-tour.

Nevertheless she prepared a handsome present for the bride: a Bible and a Prayer-book bound in velvet with silver-clasps; and also a collection of household account-books, at the beginning of which Lady Cumnor wrote down with her own hand the proper weekly allowance of bread, butter, eggs, meat, and groceries per head, with the London prices of the articles, so that the most inexperienced housekeeper might ascertain whether her expenditure exceeded her means, as she expressed herself in the note which she sent with the handsome, dull present.

"If you are driving into Hollingford, Harriet, perhaps you will take these books to Miss Kirkpatrick," said Lady Cumnor, after she had sealed her note with all the straightness and correctness befitting a countess of her immaculate character. "I understand they are all going up to London to-morrow for this wedding, in spite of what I said to Clare of the duty of being married in one's own parish-church. She told me at the time that she entirely agreed with me, but that her husband had such a strong wish for a visit to London, that she did not know how she could oppose him consistently with her wifely duty. I advised her to repeat to him my reasons for thinking that they would be ill-advised to have the marriage in town; but I am afraid she has been overruled. That was her one great fault when she lived with us; she was always so yielding, and never knew how to say 'No.'"

"Mamma!" said Lady Harriet, with a little sly coaxing in her tone, "do you think you would have been so fond of her, if she had opposed you, and said 'No,' when you wished her to say 'Yes?'"

"To be sure I should, my dear. I like everybody to have an opinion of their own; only when my opinions are based on thought and experience, which few people have had equal opportunities of acquiring, I think it is but proper deference in others to allow themselves to be convinced. In fact, I think it is only obstinacy which keeps them from acknowledging that they are. I am not a despot, I hope?" she asked, with some anxiety.

"If you are, dear mamma," said Lady Harriet, kissing the stern uplifted face very fondly, "I like a despotism better than a republic, and I must be very despotic over my ponies, for it's already getting very late for my drive round by Ash-holt."

But when she arrived at the Gibsons', she was detained so long there by the state of the family, that she had to give up her going to Ash-holt.

Molly was sitting in the drawing-room pale and trembling, and keeping herself quiet only by a strong effort. She was the only person there when Lady Harriet entered: the room was all in disorder, strewed with presents and paper, and pasteboard boxes, and half-displayed articles of finery.

"You look like Marius sitting amidst the ruins of Carthage, my dear! What's the matter? Why have you got on that wobegone face? This marriage isn't broken off, is it? Though nothing would surprise me where the beautiful Cynthia is concerned."

"Oh, no! that's all right. But I've caught a fresh cold, and papa says he thinks I had better not go to the wedding."

"Poor little one! And it's the first visit to London too!"

"Yes. But what I most care for is the not being with Cynthia to the last; and then, papa"—she stopped, for she could hardly go on without open crying, and she did not want to do that. Then she cleared her voice. "Papa!" she continued, "has so looked forward to this holiday,—and seeing—and—, and going—oh! I can't tell you where; but he has quite a list of people and sights to be seen, —and now he says he should not be comfortable to leave me all alone for more than three days,—two for travelling, and one for the wedding." Just then Mrs. Gibson came in, ruffled too after her fashion, though the presence of Lady Harriet was wonderfully smoothing.

"My dear Lady Harriet—how kind of you! Ah, yes, I see this poor unfortunate child has been telling you of her ill-luck; just when everything was going on so beautifully; I'm sure it was that open window at your back, Molly,—you know you would persist that it could do you no harm, and now you see the mischief! I'm sure I shan't be able to enjoy myself—and at my only child's wedding too—without you; for I can't think of leaving you without Maria. I would rather sacrifice anything myself than think of you, uncared for, and dismal at home."

"I'm sure Molly is as sorry as any one," said Lady Harriet.

"No. I don't think she is," said Mrs. Gibson, with happy disregard of the chronology of events, "or she would not have sate with her back to an open window the day before yesterday, when I told her not. But it can't be helped now. Papa too—but it is my duty to make the best of everything, and look at the cheerful side of life. I wish I could persuade her to do the same" (turning and addressing Lady Harriet). "But, you see, it is a great mortification to a girl of her age to lose her first visit to London."

"It is not that," began Molly; but Lady Harriet made her a little sign to be silent while she herself spoke.

"Now, Clare! you and I can manage it all, I think, if you will but help me in a plan I've got in my head. Mr. Gibson shall stay as long as ever he can in London; and Molly shall be well cared for, and have some change of air and scene too, which is really what she needs as much as anything, in my poor opinion. I can't spirit her to the wedding and give her a sight of London; but I can carry

ker off to the Towers, and invite her myself; and send daily bulletins up to London, so that Mr. Gibson may feel quite at ease, and stay with you as long as you like. What do you say to it, Clare?"

"Oh, I could not go," said Molly; "I should only be a trouble to everybody."

"Nobody asked you for your opinion, little one. If we wise elders decide that you are to go, you must submit in silence."

Meanwhile Mrs. Gibson was rapidly balancing advantages and disadvantages. Amongst the latter, jealousy came in predominant. Amongst the former,—it would sound well; Maria could then accompany Cynthia and herself as "their maid,"—Mr. Gibson would stay longer with her, and it was always desirable to have a man at her beck and call in such a place as London; besides that, this identical man was gentlemanly and good-looking, and a favourite with her prosperous brother-in-law; the ayes had it.

"What a charming plan! I cannot think of anything kinder or pleasanter for this poor darling. Only—what will Lady Cumnor say? I am modest for my family as much as for myself," she continued.

"You know mamma's sense of hospitality is never more gratified than when the house is quite full; and papa is just like her. Besides, she is fond of you, and grateful to our good Mr. Gibson, and will be fond of you, little one, when she knows you as I do."

Molly's heart sank within her at the prospect. Excepting on the one evening of her father's wedding-day, she had never even seen the outside of the Towers since that unlucky day in her childhood when she had fallen asleep on Clare's bed. She had a dread of the countess, a dislike to her house; only it seemed as if it was a solution to the problem of what to do with her, which had been perplexing every one all morning, and so evidently that it had caused her much distress. She kept silence, though her lips quivered from time to time. Oh, if Miss Brownings had not chosen this very time of all others to pay their monthly visit to Miss Hornblower! If she could only have gone there, and lived with them in their quaint, quiet, primitive way, instead of having to listen, without remonstrance, to hearing plans discussed about her, as if she was an inanimate chattel.

"She shall have the south pink room, opening out of mine by one door, you remember; and the dressing-room shall be made into

a cosy little sitting-room for her, in case she likes to be by herself. Parkes shall attend upon her, and I'm sure Mr. Gibson must know Parkes's powers as a nurse by this time. We shall have all manner of agreeable people in the house to amuse her downstairs; and when she has got rid of this access of cold, I will drive her out every day, and write daily bulletins, as I said. Pray tell Mr. Gibson all that, and let it be considered as settled. I will come for her in the close carriage to-morrow, at eleven. And now may I see the lovely bride-elect, and give her mamma's present, and my own good wishes?"

So Cynthia came in, and demurely received the very proper present, and the equally coveted congratulations, without testifying any very great delight or gratitude at either: for she was quite quick enough to detect there was no great afflux of affection accompanying either. But when she heard her mother quickly recapitulating all the details of the plan for Molly, Cynthia's eyes did sparkle with gladness; and almost to Lady Harriet's surprise, she thanked her as if she had conferred a personal favour upon her. Lady Harriet saw, too, that in a very quiet way, she had taken Molly's hand, and was holding it all the time, as if loth to think of their approaching separation—somehow, she and Lady Harriet were brought nearer together by this little action than they had ever been before.

Molly had hoped that her father might have raised some obstacles to the project; in this she was disappointed. But she was satisfied when she perceived how he seemed to feel that, by placing her under the care of Lady Harriet and Parkes, he should be relieved from anxiety. And now he spoke of this change of air and scene as being the very thing he had been wishing to secure for her; country air, and absence of excitement as this would be; for the only other place where he could have secured her these advantages, and at the same time sent her as an invalid, was to Hamley Hall; and he dreaded the associations there with the beginning of her present illness.

So Molly was driven off in state the next day, leaving her own home all in confusion with the assemblage of boxes and trunks in the hall, and all the other symptoms of the approaching departure of the family for London and the wedding. All the morning Cynthia had been with her in her room, attending to the arrangement of Molly's clothes, instructing her what to wear with what, and rejoicing over the pretty smartnesses, which, having been prepared

for her as bridesmaid, were now to serve as adornments for her visit to the Towers. Both Molly and Cynthia spoke about dress as if it was the very object of their lives; for each dreaded the introduction of more serious subjects; Cynthia more for Molly than herself. Only when the carriage was announced, and Molly was preparing to go downstairs, Cynthia said,—

"Im not going to thank you, Molly, or to tell you how I love you."

"Don't," said Molly, "I can't bear it."

"Only you know you are to be my first visitor, and if you wear brown ribbons to a green gown, I'll turn you out of the house!" So they parted. Mr. Gibson was there in the hall to hand Molly in. He had ridden hard; and was now giving her two or three last injunctions as to her health.

"Think of us on Thursday," said he. "I declare I don't know which of her three lovers she mayn't summon at the very last moment to act the part of bridegroom. I'm determined to be surprised at nothing; and will give her away with a good grace to whoever comes."

They drove away, and until they were out of sight of the house, Molly had enough to do to keep returning the kisses of the hand wafted to her by her stepmother out of the drawing-room window, while at the same time her eyes were fixed on a white handkerchief fluttering out of the attic from which she herself had watched Roger's departure nearly two years before. What changes time had brought!

When Molly arrived at the Towers she was convoyed into Lady Cumnor's presence by Lady Harriet. It was a mark of respect to the lady of the house, which the latter knew that her mother would expect; but she was anxious to get it over, and take Molly up into the room which she had been so busy arranging for her. Lady Cumnor was, however, very kind, if not positively gracious.

"You are Lady Harriet's visitor, my dear," said she, "and I hope she will take good care of you. If not, come and complain of her to me." It was as near an approach to a joke as Lady Cumnor ever perpetrated, and from it Lady Harriet knew that her mother was pleased by Molly's manners and appearance.

"Now, here you are in your own kingdom; and into this room I shan't venture to come without express permission. Here's the last new Quarterly, and the last new novel, and the last new essay.

Now, my dear, you needn't come down again to-day unless you like it. Parkes shall bring you everything and anything you want. You must get strong as fast as you can, for all sorts of great and famous people are coming to-morrow and the next day, and I think you'll like to see them. Suppose for to-day you only come down to lunch, and if you like it, in the evening. Dinner is such a wearily long meal, if one isn't strong; and you wouldn't miss much, for there's only my cousin Charles in the house now, and he's the personification of sensible silence."

Molly was only too glad to allow Lady Harriet to decide everything for her. It had begun to rain, and was altogether a gloomy day for August; and there was a small fire of scented wood burning cheerfully in the sitting-room appropriated to her. High up, it commanded a wide and pleasant view over the park, and from it could be seen the spire of Hollingford Church, which gave Molly a pleasant idea of neighbourhood to home. She was left alone, lying on the sofa—books near her, wood crackling and blazing, wafts of wind bringing the beating rain against the window, and so enhancing the sense of indoor comfort by the outdoor contrast. Parkes was unpacking for her. Lady Harriet had introduced Parkes to Molly by saying, "Now, Molly, this is Mrs. Parkes, the only person I am ever afraid of. She scolds me if I dirty myself with my paints, just as if I was a little child; and she makes me go to bed when I want to sit up,"—Parkes was smiling grimly all the time;—"so to get rid of her tyranny I give her you as victim. Parkes, rule over Miss Gibson with a rod of iron; make her eat and drink, and rest and sleep, and dress as you think wisest and best."

Parkes had begun to reign by putting Molly on the sofa, and saying, "If you will give me your keys, Miss, I will unpack your things, and let you know when it is time for me to arrange your hair, preparatory to luncheon." For if Lady Harriet used familiar colloquialisms from time to time, she certainly had not learnt it from Parkes, who piqued herself on the correctness of her language.

When Molly went down to lunch she found "cousin Charles," with his aunt, Lady Cumnor. He was a certain Sir Charles Morton, the son of Lady Cumnor's only sister: a plain, sandy-haired man of thirty-five or so; immensely rich, very sensible, awkward, and reserved. He had had a chronic attachment, of many years' standing, to his cousin, Lady Harriet, who did not care for him in the least, although it was the marriage very

earnestly desired for her by her mother. Lady Harriet was, however, on friendly terms with him, ordered him about, and told him what to do, and what to leave undone, without having even a doubt as to the willingness of his obedience. She had given him his cue about Molly.

"Now, Charles, the girl wants to be interested and amused without having to take any trouble for herself; she's too delicate to be very active either in mind or body. Just look after her when the house gets full, and place her where she can hear and see everything and everybody, without any fuss and responsibility.

So Sir Charles began this day at luncheon by taking Molly under his quiet protection. He did not say much to her; but what he did say was thoroughly friendly and sympathetic; and Molly began, as he and Lady Harriet intended that she should, to have a kind of pleasant reliance upon him. Then in the evening while the rest of the family were at dinner—after Molly's tea and hour of quiet repose, Parkes came and dressed her in some of the new clothes prepared for the Kirkpatrick visit, and did her hair in some new and pretty way, so that when Molly looked at herself in the cheval-glass, she scarcely knew the elegant reflection to be that of herself. She was fetched down by Lady Harriet into the great long formidable drawing-room, which as an interminable place of pacing, had haunted her dreams ever since her childhood. At the further end sat Lady Cumnor at her tapestry work; the light of fire and candle seemed all concentrated on that one bright part where presently Lady Harriet made tea, and Lord Cumnor went to sleep, and Sir Charles read passages aloud from the *Edinburgh Review* to the three ladies at their work.

When Molly went to bed she was constrained to admit that staying at the Towers as a visitor was rather pleasant than otherwise; and she tried to reconcile old impressions with new ones, until she fell asleep. There was another comparatively quiet day before the expected guests began to arrive in the evening. Lady Harriet took Molly a drive in her little pony-carriage; and for the first time for many weeks Molly began to feel the delightful spring of returning health; the dance of youthful spirits in the fresh air cleared by the previous day's rain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

REVIVING HOPES AND BRIGHTENING PROSPECTS.

"If you can without fatigue, dear, do come down to dinner to-day; you'll then see the people one by one as they appear, instead of having to encounter a crowd of strangers. Hollingford will be here too. I hope you'll find it pleasant."

So Molly made her appearance at dinner that day; and got to know, by sight at least, some of the most distinguished of the visitors at the Towers. The next day was Thursday, Cynthia's wedding-day; bright and fine in the country, whatever it might be in London. And there were several letters from the home-people awaiting Molly when she came downstairs to the late breakfast. For, every day, every hour, she was gaining strength and health, and she was unwilling to continue her invalid habits any longer than was necessary. She looked so much better that Sir Charles noticed it to Lady Harriet; and several of the visitors spoke of her this morning as a very pretty, lady-like, and graceful girl. This was Thursday; on Friday, as Lady Harriet had told her, some visitors from the more immediate neighbourhood were expected to stay over the Sunday; but she had not mentioned their names, and when Molly went down into the drawing-room before dinner, she was almost startled by perceiving Roger Hamley in the centre of a group of gentlemen, who were all talking together eagerly, and, as it seemed to her, making him the object of their attention. He made a hitch in his conversation, lost the precise meaning of a question addressed to him; answered it rather hastily, and made his way to where Molly was sitting, a little behind Lady Harriet. He had heard that she was staying at the Towers, but he was almost as much surprised as she was, by his unexpected appearance, for he had only seen her once or twice since his return from Africa, and then in the guise of an invalid. Now in her pretty

evening dress, with her hair beautifully dressed, her delicate complexion flushed a little with timidity, yet her movements and manners bespeaking quiet ease, Roger hardly recognized her, although he acknowledged her identity. He began to feel that admiring deference which most young men experience when conversing with a very pretty girl: a sort of desire to obtain her good opinion in a manner very different to his old familiar friendliness. He was annoyed when Sir Charles, whose especial charge she still was, came up to take her in to dinner. He could not quite understand the smile of mutual intelligence that passed between the two, each being aware of Lady Harriet's plan of sheltering Molly from the necessity of talking, and acting in conformity with her wishes as much as with their own. Roger found himself puzzling, and watching them from time to time during dinner. Again in the evening he sought her out, but found her again pre-occupied with one of the young men staying in the house, who had had the advantage of a two days of mutual interest, and acquaintance with the daily events, and jokes and anxieties of the family circle. Molly could not help wishing to break off all this trivial talk and to make room for Roger: she had so much to ask him about everything at the Hall; he was, and had been such a stranger to them all for these last two months, and more. But though both wanted to speak to the other more than to any one else in the room, it so happened that everything seemed to conspire to prevent it. Lord Hollingford carried off Roger to the clatter of middle-aged men; he was wanted to give his opinion upon some scientific subject. Mr. Ernest Watson, the young man referred to above, kept his place by Molly, as the prettiest girl in the room, and almost dazed her by his never-ceasing flow of clever small talk. She looked so tired and pale at last that the ever-watchful Lady Harriet sent Sir Charles to the rescue, and after a few words with Lady Harriet, Roger saw Molly quietly leave the room; and a sentence or two which he heard Lady Harriet address to her cousin made him know that it was for the night. Those sentences might bear another interpretation than the obvious one.

"Really, Charles, considering that she is in your charge, I think you might have saved her from the chatter and patter of Mr. Watson; I can only stand it when I am in the strongest health."

Why was Molly in Sir Charles's charge? why? Then Roger remembered many little things that might serve to confirm the fancy he had got into his head; and he went to bed puzzled and annoyed.

It seemed to him such an incongruous, hastily-got-up sort of engagement, if engagement it really was. On Saturday they were more fortunate: they had a long *tête-à-tête* in the most public place in the house—on a sofa in the hall were Molly was resting at Lady Harriet's command before going upstairs after a walk. Roger was passing through, and saw her, and came to her. Standing before her, and making pretence of playing with the gold-fish in a great marble basin close at hand,—

"I was very unlucky," said he. "I wanted to get near you last night, but it was quite impossible. You were so busy talking to Mr. Watson, until Sir Charles Morton came and carried you off—with such an air of authority? Have you known him long?"

Now this was not at all the manner in which Roger had predetermined that he would speak of Sir Charles to Molly; but the words came out in spite of himself.

"No! not long. I never saw him before I came here—on Tuesday. But Lady Harriet told him to see that I did not get tired, for I wanted to come down; but you know I have not been strong. He is a cousin of Lady Harriet's, and does all she tells him to do."

"Oh! he's not handsome; but I believe he's a very sensible man."

"Yes! I should think so. He is so silent though, that I can hardly judge."

"He bears a very high character in the county," said Roger, willing now to give him his full due.

Molly stood up.

"I must go upstairs," she said; "I only sate down here for a minute or two because Lady Harriet bade me."

"Stop a little longer," said he. "This is really the pleasantest place; this basin of water-lilies gives one the idea, if not the sensation, of coolness; besides—it seems so long since I saw you, and I've a message from my father to give you. He is very angry with you."

"Angry with me!" said Molly in surprise.

"Yes! He heard that you had come here for change of air; and he was offended that you hadn't come to us—to the Hall, instead. He said that you should have remembered old friends!"

Molly took all this quite gravely, and did not at first notice the smile on his face.

"Oh! I am so sorry!" said she. "But will you please tell him how it all happened. Lady Harriet called the very day when it was settled that I was not to go to ——" Cynthia's wedding, she was going to add, but she suddenly stopped short, and, blushing deeply, changed the expression, "go to London, and she planned it all in a minute, and convinced mamma and papa, and had her own way. There was really no resisting her."

"I think you will have to tell all this to my father yourself, if you mean to make your peace. Why can you not come on to the Hall when you leave the Towers?"

To go in the cool manner suggested from one house to another, after the manner of a royal progress, was not at all according to Molly's primitive home-keeping notions. She made answer,—

"I should like it very much, some time. But I must go home first. They will want me more than ever now ——"

Again she felt herself touching on a sore subject, and stopped short. Roger became annoyed at her so constantly conjecturing what he must be feeling on the subject of Cynthia's marriage. With sympathetic perception she had discerned that the idea must give him pain; and perhaps she also knew that he would dislike to show the pain; but she had not the presence of mind or ready wit to give a skilful turn to the conversation. All this annoyed Roger, he could hardly tell why. He determined to take the metaphorical bull by the horns. Until that was done, his footing with Molly would always be insecure; as it always is between two friends, who mutually avoid a subject to which their thoughts perpetually recur.

"Ah, yes!" said he. "Of course you must be of double importance now Miss Kirkpatrick has left you. I saw her marriage in *The Times* yesterday."

His tone of voice was changed in speaking of her, but her name had been named between them, and that was the great thing to accomplish.

"Still," he continued, "I think I must urge my father's claim for a short visit, and all the more, because I can really see the apparent improvement in your health since I came,—only yesterday. Besides, Molly," it was the old familiar Roger of former days who spoke now, "I think you could help us at home. Aimée is shy and awkward with my father, and he has never taken quite kindly to her,—yet I

know they would like and value each other, if some one could but bring them together,—and it would be such a comfort to me if this could take place before I have to leave."

"To leave—are you going away again?"

"Yes. Have you not heard? I didn't complete my engagement. I'm going again in September for six months."

"I remember. But somehow I fancied—you seemed to have settled down into the old way at the Hall."

"So my father appears to think. But it is not likely I shall ever make it my home again; and that is partly the reason why I want my father to adopt the notion of Aimée's living with him. Ah, here are all the people coming back from their walk. However, I shall see you again; perhaps this afternoon we may get a little quiet time, for I've a great deal to consult you about."

They separated then, and Molly went upstairs very happy; very full and warm at her heart; it was so pleasant to have Roger talking to her in this way, like a friend; she had once thought that she could never look upon the great brown-bearded celebrity in the former light of almost brotherly intimacy, but now it was all coming right. There was no opportunity for renewed confidences that afternoon. Molly went a quiet decorous drive as fourth with two dowagers and one spinster; but it was very pleasant to think that she should see him again at dinner, and again to-morrow. On the Sunday evening, as they all were sitting and loitering on the lawn before dinner, Roger went on with what he had to say about the position of his sister-in-law in his father's house; the mutual bond between the mother and grandfather being the child; who was also, through jealousy, the bone of contention and the severance. There were many details to be given in order to make Molly quite understand the difficulty of the situations on both sides; and the young man and the girl became absorbed in what they were talking about, and wandered away into the shade of the long avenue. Lady Harriet separated herself from a group and came up to Lord Hollingford, who was sauntering a little apart, and putting her arm within his with the familiarity of a favourite sister, she said,—

"Don't you think that your pattern young man, and my favourite young woman, are finding out each other's good qualities?"

He had not been observing as she had been.

"Who do you mean?" said he.

"Look along the avenue; who are those?"

"Mr. Hamley and—is it not Miss Gibson? I can't quite make out. Oh! if you're letting your fancy run off in that direction, I can tell you it's quite waste of time. Roger Hamley is a man who will soon have an European reputation!"

"That's very possible, and yet it doesn't make any difference in my opinion. Molly Gibson is capable of appreciating him."

"She is a very pretty, good little country-girl. I don't mean to say anything against her, but ——"

"Remember the Charity Ball; you called her 'unusually intelligent' after you had danced with her there. But, after all, we're like the genie and the fairy in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, who each cried up the merits of the Prince Caramalzaman and the Princess Badoura."

"Hamley is not a marrying man."

"How do you know?"

"I know that he has very little private fortune, and I know that science is not a remunerative profession, if profession it can be called."

"Oh, if that's all—a hundred things may happen—some one may leave him a fortune—or this tiresome little heir that nobody wanted, may die."

"Hush, Harriet, that's the worst of allowing yourself to plan far ahead for the future; you are sure to contemplate the death of some one, and to reckon upon the contingency as affecting events."

"As if lawyers were not always doing something of the kind."

"Leave it to those to whom it is necessary. I dislike planning marriages, or looking forward to deaths about equally."

"You are getting very prosaic and tiresome, Hollingford!"

"Only getting!" said he smiling; "I thought you had always looked upon me as a tirsome matter-of-fact fellow."

"Now, if you're going to fish for a compliment I am gone. Only remember my prophecy when my vision comes to pass; or make a bet, and whoever wins shall spend the money on a present to Prince Caramalzaman or Princess Badoura, as the case may be."

Lord Hollingford remembered his sister's words as he heard Roger say to Molly as he was leaving the Towers on the following day,—

"Then I may tell my father that you will come and pay him a visit next week? You don't know what pleasure it will give him." He had been on the point of saying will give *us*, but he had an

instinct which told him it was as well to consider Molly's promised visit as exclusively made to his father.

The next day Molly went home; she was astonished at herself for being so sorry to leave the Towers; and found it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the long-fixed idea of the house as a place wherein to suffer all a child's tortures of dismay and forlornness with her new and fresh conception. She had gained health, she had had pleasure, the faint fragrance of a new and unacknowledged hope had stolen into her life. No wonder that Mr. Gibson was struck with the improvement in her looks, and Mrs. Gibson impressed with her increased grace.

"Ah, Molly," said she, "it's really wonderful to see what a little good society will do for a girl. Even a week of association with such people as one meets with at the Towers is, as somebody said of a lady of rank whose name I have forgotten, 'a polite education in itself.' There is something quite different about you—a *je ne sçais quoi*—that would tell me at once that you have been mingling with the aristocracy. With all her charms, it was what my darling Cynthia wanted; not that Mr. Henderson thought so, for a more devoted lover can hardly be conceived. He absolutely bought her a parure of diamonds. I was obliged to say to him that I had studied to preserve her simplicity of taste, and that he must not corrupt her with too much luxury. But I was rather disappointed at their going off without a maid. It was the one blemish in the arrangements—the spot in the sun. Dear Cynthia, when I think of her, I do assure you, Molly, I make it my nightly prayer that I may be able to find you just such another husband. And all this time you have never told me who you met at the Towers?"

Molly ran over a list of names. Roger Hamley's came last.

"Upon my word! That young man is pushing his way up!"

"The Hamleys are a far older family than the Cumnors," said Molly, flushing up.

"Now, Molly, I can't have you democratic. Rank is a great distinction. It is quite enough to have dear papa with democratic tendencies. But we won't begin to quarrel. Now that you and I are left alone, we ought to be bosom friends, and I hope we shall be. Roger Hamley did not say much about that unfortunate little Osborne Hamley, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, he says his father dotes on the child; and he seemed very proud of him, himself."

"I thought the squire must be getting very much infatuated with something. I daresay the French mother takes care of that. Why! he has scarcely taken any notice of you for this month or more, and before that you were everything."

It was about six weeks since Cynthia's engagement had become publicly known, and that might have had something to do with the squire's desertion, Molly thought. But she said,

"The squire has sent me an invitation to go and stay there next week if you have no objection, mamma. They seem to want a companion for Mrs. Osborne Hamley, who is not very strong."

"I can hardly tell what to say,—I don't like your having to associate with a Frenchwoman of doubtful rank; and I can't bear the thought of losing my child—my only daughter now. I did ask Helen Kirkpatrick, but she can't come for some time; and the house is going to be altered. Papa has consented to build me another room at last, for Cynthia and Mr. Henderson will, of course, come and see us; we shall have many more visitors, I expect, and your bedroom will make a capital lumber-room; and Maria wants a week's holiday. I am always so unwilling to put any obstacles in the way of any one's pleasure,—weakly unwilling, I believe,—but it certainly would be very convenient to have you out of the house for a few days; so, for once, I will waive my own wish for your companionship, and plead your cause with papa."

Miss Brownings came to call and hear the double batch of news. Mrs. Goodenough had come the very day on which they had returned from Miss Hornblower's, to tell them the astounding fact of Molly Gibson having gone on a visit to the Towers; not to come back at night, but to sleep there, to be there for two or three days, just as if she was a young lady of quality. So Miss Brownings came to hear all the details of the wedding from Mrs. Gibson, and the history of Molly's visit at the Towers as well. But Mrs. Gibson did not like this divided interest, and some of her old jealousy of Molly's intimacy at the Towers had returned.

"Now, Molly," said Miss Browning, "let us hear how you behaved among the great folks. You must not be set up with all their attention; remember that they pay it to you for your good father's sake."

"Molly is, I think, quite aware," put in Mrs. Gibson, in her most soft and languid tone, "that she owes her privilege of visiting at such a house to Lady Cumnor's kind desire to set my mind quite

at liberty at the time of Cynthia's marriage. As soon as ever I had returned home, Molly came back ; indeed, I should not have thought it right to let her intrude upon their kindness beyond what was absolutely necessary."

Molly felt extremely uncomfortable at all this, although perfectly aware of the entire inaccuracy of the statement.

"Well, but Molly!" said Miss Browning, "never mind whether you went there on your own merits, or your worthy father's merits, or Mrs. Gibson's merits; but tell us what you did when you were there."

So Molly began an account of their sayings and doings, which she could have made far more interesting to Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe if she had not been conscious of her stepmother's critical listening. She had to tell it all with a mental squint; the surest way to spoil a narration. She was also subject to Mrs. Gibson's perpetual corrections of little statements which she knew to be facts. But what vexed her most of all was Mrs. Gibson's last speech before the Miss Brownings left.

"Molly has fallen into rambling ways with this visit of hers, of which she makes so much, as if nobody had ever been in a great house but herself. She is going to Hamley Hall next week,—getting quite dissipated in fact."

Yet to Mrs. Goodenough, the next caller on the same errand of congratulation, Mrs. Gibson's tone was quite different. There had always been a tacit antagonism between the two, and the conversation now ran as follows :—

Mrs. Goodenough began,

"Well! Mrs. Gibson, I suppose I must wish you joy of Miss Cynthia's marriage; I should condole with some mothers as had lost their daughters; but you're not one of that sort, I reckon."

Now, as Mrs. Gibson was not quite sure to which "sort" of mothers the greatest credit was to be attached, she found it a little difficult how to frame her reply.

"Dear Cynthia!" she said. "One can't but rejoice in her happiness! And yet—" she ended her sentence by sighing.

"Ay. She was a young woman as would always have her followers; for, to tell the truth, she was as pretty a creature as ever I saw in my life. And all the more she needed skilful guidance. I'm sure I, for one, am as glad as can be she's done so well by her-

self. Folks say Mr. Henderson has a handsome private fortune over and above what he makes by the law."

"There is no fear but that my Cynthia will have everything this world can give!" said Mrs. Gibson with dignity.

"Well, well! she was always a bit of a favourite of mine; and as I was saying to my granddaughter there" (for she was accompanied by a young lady, who looked keenly to the prospect of some wedding-cake), "I was never one of those who ran her down, and called her a flirt and a jilt. I'm glad to hear she's like to be so well off. And now, I suppose, you'll be turning your mind to doing something for Miss Molly there?"

"If you mean by that doing anything that can, by hastening her marriage, deprive me of the company of one who is like my own child, you are very much mistaken, Mrs. Goodenough. And pray remember, I am the last person in the world to match-make. Cynthia made Mr. Henderson's acquaintance at her uncle's in London."

"Ay! I thought her cousins was very often ill, and needing her nursing, and you were very keen she should be of use. I'm not saying but what it's right in a mother; I'm only putting in a word for Miss Molly."

"Thank you, Mrs. Goodenough," said Molly, half angry, half laughing. "When I want to be married, I'll not trouble mamma. I'll look out for myself."

"Molly is becoming so popular, I hardly know how we shall keep her at home," said Mrs. Gibson. "I miss her sadly; but, as I said to Mr. Gibson, let young people have change, and see a little of the world while they are young. It has been a great advantage to her being at the Towers while so many clever and distinguished people were there. I can already see a difference in her tone and conversation: an elevation in her choice of subjects. And now she is going to Hamley Hall. I can assure you I feel quite a proud mother, when I see how she is sought after. And my other daughter —my Cynthia—writing such letters from Paris!"

"Things is a deal changed since my days, for sure," said Mrs. Goodenough. "So, perhaps, I'm no judge. When I was married first, him and me went in a postchaise to his father's house, a matter of twenty mile off at the outside; and sate down to as good a supper amongst his friends and relations as you'd wish to see. And that was my first wedding jaunt. My second was when I

better knowed my worth as a bride, and thought that now or never I must see London. But I were reckoned a very extravagant sort of a body to go so far, and spend my money, though Jerry had left me uncommon well off. But now young folks go off to Paris, and think nothing of the cost: and it's well if wilful waste don't make woeful want before they die. But I'm thankful somewhat is being done for Miss Molly's chances, as I said afore. It's not quite what I should have liked to have done for my Anna-Maria though. But times are changed, as I said just now."

CHAPTER XXX.

MOLLY GIBSON AT HAMLEY HALL.

The conversation ended there for the time. Wedding-cake and wine were brought in, and it was Molly's duty to serve them out. But those last words of Mrs. Goodenough's tingled in her ears, and she tried to interpret them to her own satisfaction in any way but the obvious one. And that, too, was destined to be confirmed; for directly after Mrs. Goodenough took her leave, Mrs. Gibson desired Molly to carry away the tray to a table close to an open corner window, where the things might be placed in readiness for any future callers; and underneath this open window went the path from the house-door to the road. Molly heard Mrs. Goodenough saying to her granddaughter,—

"That Mrs. Gibson is a deep 'un. There's Mr. Roger Hamley as like as not to have the Hall estate, and she sends Molly a-visiting—" and then she passed out of hearing. Molly could have burst out crying, with a full sudden conviction of what Mrs. Goodenough had been alluding to; her sense of the impropriety of Molly's going to visit at the Hall when Roger was at home. To be sure, Mrs. Goodenough was a commonplace, unrefined woman. Mrs. Gibson did not seem to have even noticed the allusion. Mr. Gibson took it all as a matter of course that Molly should go to the Hall as simply now, as she had done before. Roger had spoken of it in so straightforward a manner as showed he had no conception of its being an impropriety,—this visit,—this visit until now so happy a subject of anticipation. Molly felt as if she could never speak to any one of the idea to which Mrs. Goodenough's words had given rise; as if she could never be the first to suggest the notion of impropriety, which pre-supposed what she blushed to think of. Then she tried to comfort herself by reasoning. If it had

been forward or indelicate, really improper in the slightest degree, who would have been so ready as her father to put his veto upon it? But reasoning was of no use after Mrs. Goodenough's words had put fancies into Molly's head. The more she bade these fancies begone the more they answered her (as Daniel O'Rourke did the man in the moon, when he bade Dan get off his seat on the sickle, and go into empty space) :—"The more ye ask us the more we won't stir." One may smile at a young girl's miseries of this description; but they are very real and stinging miseries to her. All that Molly could do was to resolve on a single eye to the dear old squire, and his mental and bodily comforts; to try and heal up any breaches which might have occurred between him and Aimée; and to ignore Roger as much as possible. Good Roger! Kind Roger! Dear Roger! It would be very hard to avoid him as much as was consistent with common politeness; but it would be right to do it; and when she was with him she must be as natural as possible, or he might observe some difference; but what was natural? How much ought she avoid being with him? Would he even notice if she was more chary of her company, more calculating of her words? Alas! the simplicity of their intercourse was spoilt henceforwards! She made laws for herself; she resolved to devote herself to the squire and to Aimée, and to forget Mrs. Goodenough's foolish speeches; but her perfect freedom was gone; and with it half her chance, that is to say, half her chance would have been lost over any strangers who had not known her before; they would probably have thought her stiff and awkward, and apt to say things and then retract them. But she was so different from her usual self that Roger noticed the change in her as soon as she arrived at the Hall. She had carefully measured out the days of her visit; they were to be exactly the same number as she had spent at the Towers. She feared lest if she stayed a shorter time the squire might be annoyed. Yet how charming the place looked in its early autumnal glow as she drove up! And there was Roger at the hall-door, waiting to receive her, watching for her coming. And then he retreated, apparently to summon his sister-in-law, who came now timidly forwards in her deep widow's mourning, holding her boy in her arms as if to protect her shyness; but he struggled down, and ran towards the carriage, eager to greet his friend the coachman, and to obtain a promised ride. Roger did not say much himself; he wanted to make Aimée feel her place as daughter of the house; but

she was too timid to speak much. And she only took Molly by the hand and led her into the drawing-room, where, as if by a sudden impulse of gratitude for all the tender nursing she had received during her illness, she put her arms round Molly, and kissed her long and well. And after that they came to be friends.

It was nearly lunch-time, and the squire always made his appearance at that meal, more for the pleasure of seeing his grandson eat his dinner than for any hunger of his own. To-day Molly quickly saw the whole state of the family affairs. She thought that even had Roger said nothing about them at the Towers, she should have seen that neither the father nor the daughter-in-law had as yet found the clue to each other's characters, although they had now been living for several months in the same house. Aimée seemed to forget her English in her nervousness; and to watch with the jealous eyes of a dissatisfied mother, all the proceedings of the squire towards her little boy. They were not of the wisest kind, it must be owned; the child sipped the strong ale with evident relish, and clamoured for everything which he saw the others enjoying. Aimée could hardly attend to Molly for her anxiety as to what her boy was doing and eating; yet she said nothing. Roger took the end of the table opposite to that at which sat grandfather and grandchild. After the boy's first wants were gratified the squire addressed himself to Molly.

"Well! and so you can come here a-visiting though you have been among the grand folks. I thought you were going to cut us, Miss Molly, when I heard you was gone to the Towers. Couldn't find any other place to stay at while father and mother were away, but an earl's, eh?"

"They asked me, and I went," said Molly; "now you've asked me, and I've come here."

"I think you might ha' known you'd be always welcome here, without waiting for asking. Why, Molly! I look upon you as a kind of daughter more than Madam there!" dropping his voice a little, and perhaps supposing that the child's babble would drown the signification of his words.

"Nay, you needn't look at me so pitifully, she doesn't follow English readily."

"I think she does!" said Molly, in a low voice,—not looking up, however, for fear of catching another glimpse at Aimée's sudden forlornness of expression and deepened colour. She felt grateful, as

if for a personal favour, when she heard Roger speaking to Aimée the moment afterwards in the tender terms of brotherly friendliness; and presently these two were sufficiently engaged in a separate conversation to allow Molly and the squire to go on talking.

"He's a sturdy chap, isn't he?" said the squire, stroking the little Roger's curly head. "And he can puff four puffs at grandpapa's pipe without being sick, can't he?"

"I s'ant puff any more puffs," said the boy, resolutely. "Mamma says No. I s'ant."

"That's just like her!" said the squire, dropping his voice this time however. "As if it could do the child any harm!"

Molly made a point of turning the conversation from all personal subjects after this, and kept the squire talking about the progress of his drainage during the rest of lunch. He offered to take her to see it; and she acceded to the proposal, thinking, meantime, how little she need have anticipated the being thrown too intimately with Roger, who seemed to devote himself to his sister-in-law. But, in the evening, when Aimée had gone upstairs to put her boy to bed, and the squire was asleep in his easy-chair, a sudden flush of memory brought Mrs. Goodenough's words again to her mind. She was virtually tête-à-tête with Roger, as she had been dozens of times before, but now she could not help assuming an air of constraint; her eyes did not meet his in the old frank way; she took up a book at a pause in the conversation, and left him puzzled and annoyed at the change in her manner. And so it went on during all the time of her visit. If sometimes she forgot, and let herself go into all her old naturalness, by-and-by she checked herself, and became comparatively cold and reserved. Roger was pained at all this—more pained day after day; more anxious to discover the cause. Aimée, too, silently noticed how different Molly became in Roger's presence. One day she could not help saying to Molly,—

"Don't you like Roger? You would, if you only knew how good he was! He is learned, but that is nothing: it is his goodness that one admires and loves."

"He is very good," said Molly. "I have known him long enough to know that."

"But you don't think him agreeable? He is not like my poor husband, to be sure; and you knew him well, too. Ah! tell me about him once again. When you first knew him? When his mother was alive?"

Molly had grown very fond of Aimée; when the latter was at her ease she had very charming and attaching ways; but feeling uneasy in her position in the squire's house, she was almost repellent to him; and he, too, put on his worst side to her. Roger was most anxious to bring them together, and had several consultations with Molly as to the best means of accomplishing this end. As long as they talked upon this subject, she spoke to him in the quiet sensible manner which she inherited from her father; but when their discussions on this point were ended, she fell back into her piquant assumption of dignified reserve. It was very difficult to her to maintain this strange manner, especially when once or twice she fancied that it gave him pain; and she would go into her own room and suddenly burst into tears on these occasions, and wish that her visit was ended, and that she was once again in the eventless tranquillity of her own home. Yet presently her fancy changed, and she clung to the swiftly passing hours, as if she would still retain the happiness of each. For, unknown to her, Roger was exerting himself to make her visit pleasant. He was not willing to appear as the instigator of all the little plans for each day, for he felt as if, somehow, he did not hold the same place in her regard as formerly. Still, one day Aimée suggested a nutting expedition—another day they gave little Roger the unheard-of pleasure of tea out-of-doors—there was something else agreeable for a third; and it was Roger who arranged all these simple pleasures—such as he knew Molly would enjoy. But to her he only appeared as the ready forwarder of Aimée's devices. The week was nearly gone, when one morning the squire found Roger sitting in the old library—with a book before him, it is true, but so deep in thought that he was evidently startled by his father's unexpected entrance.

"I thought I should find thee here, my lad! We'll have the old room done up again before winter; it smells musty enough, and yet I see it's the place for thee! I want thee to go with me round the five-acre. I'm thinking of laying it down in grass. It's time for you to be getting into the fresh air, you look quite wobegone over books, books, books; there never was a thing like 'em for stealing a man's health out of him!"

So Roger went out with his father, without saying many words till they were at some distance from the house. Then he brought out a sentence with such abruptness that he repaid his father for the start the latter had given him a quarter of an hour before.

"Father, you remember I'm going out again to the Cape next month! You spoke of doing up the library. If it is for me, I shall be away all the winter."

"Can't you get off it?" pleaded his father. "I thought maybe you'd forgotten all about it."

"Not likely!" said Roger, half smiling.

"Well, but they might have found another man to finish up your work."

"No one can finish it but myself. Besides, an engagement is an engagement. When I wrote to Lord Hollingford to tell him I must come home, I promised to go out again for another six months."

"Ay. I know. And perhaps it will put it out of my mind. It will always be hard on me to part from thee. But I daresay it's best for you."

Roger's colour deepened. "You are alluding to—to Miss Kirkpatrick. Mrs. Henderson I mean. Father, let me tell you once for all I think that was rather a hasty affair. I'm pretty sure now that we were not suited to each other. I was wretched when I got her letter—at the Cape I mean—but I believe it was for the best."

"That's right. That's my own boy," said the squire turning round, and shaking hands with his son with vehemence. "And now I'll tell you what I heard the other day, when I was at the magistrates' meeting. They were all saying she had jilted Preston."

"I don't want to hear anything against her; she may have her faults, but I can never forget how I once loved her."

"Well, well! Perhaps it's right. I was not so bad about it, was I, Roger? Poor Osborne needn't have been so secret with me. I asked your Miss Cynthia out here—and her mother and all—my bark is worse than my bite. For, if I had a wish on earth, it was to see Osborne married as befitted one of an old stock, and he went and chose out this French girl, of no family at all, only a——

"Never mind what she was; look at what she is! I wonder you are not more taken with her humility, and sweetness, father!"

"I don't even call her pretty," said the squire uneasily, for he dreaded a repetition of the arguments which Roger had often used to make him give Aimée her proper due of affection and position. Now your Miss Cynthia was pretty, I will say that for her, the baggage! and to think that when you two lads flew right in your father's face, and picked out girls below you in rank and family, you should neither of you have set your fancies on my little Molly there. I

daresay I should ha' been angry enough at the time, but the lassie would ha' found her way to my heart, as never this French lady, nor t' other one could ha' done."

Roger did not answer.

"I don't see why you mightn't put up for her still. I'm humble enough now, and you're not heir as Osborne was who married a servant-maid. Don't you think you could turn your thoughts upon Molly Gibson, Roger?"

"No!" said Roger, shortly. "It's too late—too late. Don't let us talk any more of my marrying. Isn't this the five-acre field?" And soon he was discussing the relative values of meadow, arable and pasture land with his father, as heartily as if he had never know Molly, or loved Cynthia. But the squire was not in such good spirits, and went but heavily into the discussion. At the end of it he said àpropos de bottes,—

"But don't you think you could like her if you tried, Roger?"

Roger knew perfectly well to what his father was alluding, but for an instant he was on the point of pretending to misunderstand. At length, however, he said, in a low voice,—

"I shall never try, father. Don't let us talk any more about it. As I said before, it's too late."

The squire was like a child to whom some toy has been refused; from time to time the thought of his disappointment in this matter recurred to his mind; and then he took to blaming Cynthia as the primary cause of Roger's present indifference to womankind.

It so happened that on Molly's last morning at the Hall, she received her first letter from Cynthia—Mrs. Henderson. It was just before breakfast-time; Roger was out of doors, Aimée had not as yet come down; Molly was alone in the dining-room, where the table was already laid. She had just finished reading her letter when the squire came in, and she immediately and joyfully told him what the morning had brought to her. But when she saw the squire's face, she could have bitten her tongue out for having named Cynthia's name to him. He looked vexed and depressed.

"I wish I might never hear of her again. I do. She's been the bane of my Roger, that's what she has. I haven't slept half the night, and it's all her fault. Why, there's my boy saying now that he has no heart for ever marrying, poor lad! I wish it had been you, Molly, my lads had taken a fancy for. I told Roger so t'other day, and I said that for all you were beneath what I ever thought to

see them marry,—well—it's of no use—it's too late, now, as he said. Only never let me hear that baggage's name again, that's all, and no offence to you either, lassie. I know you love the wench; but if you'll take an old man's word, you're worth a score of her. I wish young men would think so too," he muttered as he went to the side-table to carve the ham, while Molly poured out the tea—her heart very hot all the time, and effectually silenced for a space. It was with the greatest difficulty that she could keep tears of mortification from falling. She felt altogether in a wrong position in that house, which had been like a home to her until this last visit. What with Mrs. Goodenough's remarks, and now this speech of the squire's, implying—at least to her susceptible imagination—that his father had proposed her as a wife to Roger, and that she had been rejected—she was more glad than she could express, or even think, that she was going home this very morning. Roger came in from his walk while she was in this state of feeling. He saw in an instant that something had distressed Molly; and he longed to have the old friendly right of asking her what it was. But she had effectually kept him at too great a distance during the last few days for him to feel at liberty to speak to her in the old straightforward brotherly way; especially now, when he perceived her efforts to conceal her feelings, and the way in which she drank her tea in feverish haste, and accepted bread only to crumble it about her plate, untouched. It was all that he could do to make talk under these circumstances; but he backed up her efforts as well as he could until Aimée came down, grave and anxious: her boy had not had a good night, and did not seem well; he had fallen into a feverish sleep now, or she could not have left him. Immediately the whole table was in a ferment. The squire pushed away his plate, and could eat no more; Roger was trying to extract a detail or a fact out of Aimée, who began to give way to tears. Molly quickly proposed that the carriage, which had been ordered to take her home at eleven, should come round immediately—she had everything ready packed up, she said,—and bring back her father at once. By leaving directly, she said it was probable they might catch him after he had returned from his morning visits in the town, and before he had set off on his more distant round. Her proposal was agreed to, and she went upstairs to put on her things. She came down all ready into the drawing-room, expecting to find Aimée and the squire there; but during her absence word had been brought to the

anxious mother and grandfather that the child had wakened up in a panic, and both had rushed up to their darling. But Roger was in the drawing-room awaiting Molly, with a large bunch of the choicest flowers.

"Look, Molly?" said he, as she was on the point of leaving the room again, on finding him there alone. "I gathered these flowers for you before breakfast." He came to meet her reluctant advance.

"Thank you!" said she. "You are very kind. I am very much obliged to you."

"Then you must do something for me," said he, determined not to notice the restraint of her manner, and making the re-arrangement of the flowers which she held as a sort of link between them, so that she could not follow her impulse, and leave the room.

"Tell me,—honestly as I know you will if you speak at all,—haven't I done something to vex you since we were so happy at the Towers together?"

His voice was so kind and true,—his manner so winning yet wistful, that Molly would have been thankful to tell him all. She believed that he could have helped her more than any one to understand how she ought to behave rightly; he would have disentangled her fancies,—if only he himself had not lain at the very core and centre of all her perplexity and dismay. How could she tell him of Mrs. Goodenough's words troubling her maiden modesty? How could she ever repeat what his father had said that morning, and assure him that she, no more than he, wished that their old friendliness should be troubled by the thought of a nearer relationship?

"No, you never vexed me in my whole life, Roger," said she, looking straight at him for the first time for many days.

"I believe you, because you say so. I have no right to ask further, Molly. Will you give me back one of those flowers, as a pledge of what you have said?"

"Take whichever you like," said she, eagerly offering him the whole nosegay to choose from.

"No; you must choose, and you must give it me."

Just then the squire came in. Roger would have been glad if Molly had not gone on so eagerly to ransack the bunch for the choicest flower in his father's presence; but she exclaimed:

"Oh, please, Mr. Hamley, do you know which is Roger's favourite flower?"

"No. A rose, I daresay. The carriage is at the door, and, Molly my dear, I don't wan't to hurry you, but ——"

"I know. Here, Roger,—here is a rose! I will find papa as soon as ever I get home. How is the little boy?"

"I'm afraid he's beginning of some kind of a fever."

And the squire took her to the carriage, talking all the way of the little boy; Roger following, and hardly heeding what he was doing in the answer he kept asking himself: "Too late—or not? Can she ever forget that my first foolish love was given to one so different?"

While she, as the carriage rolled away, kept saying to herself,—"We are friends again. I don't believe he will remember what the dear squire took it into his head to suggest for many days. It is so pleasant to be on the old terms again! and what lovely flowers!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ROGER HAMLEY'S CONFESSION.

Roger had a great deal to think of as he turned away from looking after the carriage as long as it could be seen. The day before, he had believed that Molly had come to view all the symptoms of his growing love for her,—symptoms which he thought had been so patent,—as disgusting inconstancy to the inconstant Cynthia; that she had felt that an attachment which could be so soon transferred to another was not worth having; and that she had desired to mark all this by her changed treatment of him, and so to nip it in the bud. But this morning her old sweet, frank manner had returned—in their last interview, at any rate. He puzzled himself hard to find out what could have distressed her at breakfast-time. He even went so far as to ask Robinson whether Miss Gibson had received any letters that morning; and when he heard that she had had one, he tried to believe that the letter was in some way the cause of her sorrow. So far so good. They were friends again after their unspoken difference; but that was not enough for Roger. He felt every day more and more certain that she, and she alone, could make him happy. He had felt this, and had partly given up all hope, while his father had been urging upon him the very course he most desired to take. No need for "trying" to love her, he said to himself,—that was already done. And yet he was very jealous on her behalf. Was that love worthy of her which had once been given to Cynthia? Was not this affair too much a mocking mimicry of the last—again just on the point of leaving England for a considerable time—if he followed her now to her own home,—in the very drawing-room where he had once offered to Cynthia? And then by a strong resolve he determined on his course. They were friends now, and he kissed the rose that was her pledge of

friendship. If he went to Africa, he ran some deadly chances; he knew better what they were now than he had done when he went before. Until his return he would not even attempt to win more of her love than he already had. But once safe home again, no weak fancies as to what might or might not be her answer should prevent his running all chances to gain the woman who was to him the one who excelled all. His was not the poor vanity that thinks more of the possible mortification of a refusal than of the precious jewel of a bride that may be won. Somehow or another, please God to send him back safe, he would put his fate to the touch. And till then he would be patient. He was no longer a boy to rush at the coveted object; he was a man capable of judging and abiding.

Molly sent her father, as soon as she could find him, to the Hall; and then sate down to the old life in the home drawing-room, where she missed Cynthia's bright presence at every turn. Mrs. Gibson was in rather a querulous mood, which fastened itself upon the injury of Cynthia's letter being addressed to Molly, and not to herself.

"Considering all the trouble I had with her trousseau, I think she might have written to me."

"But she did—her first letter was to you, mamma," said Molly, her real thoughts still intent upon the Hall—upon the sick child—upon Roger, and his begging for the flower.

"Yes, just a first letter, three pages long, with an account of her crossing; while to you she can write about fashions, and how the bonnets are worn in Paris, and all sorts of interesting things. But poor mothers must never expect confidential letters, I have found that out."

"You may see my letter, mamma," said Molly, "there is really nothing in it."

"And to think of her writing, and crossing to you who don't value it, while my poor heart is yearning after my lost child! Really, life is somewhat hard to bear at times."

Then there was silence—for a while.

"Do tell me something about your visit, Molly. Is Roger very heart-broken? Does he talk much about Cynthia?"

"No. He does not mention her often; hardly ever, I think."

"I never thought he had much feeling. If he had had, he would not have let her go so easily."

"I don't see how he could help it. When he came to see her after his return, she was already engaged to Mr. Henderson—he

had come down that very day," said Molly, with perhaps more heat than the occasion required.

"My poor head!" said Mrs. Gibson, putting her hands up to her head. "One may see you've been stopping with people of robust health, and—excuse my saying it, Molly, of your friends—of unrefined habits, you've got to talk in so loud a voice. But do remember my head, Molly. So Roger has quite forgotten Cynthia, has he? Oh! what inconstant creatures men are! He will be falling in love with some grandee next, mark my words! They are making a pet and a lion of him, and he's just the kind of weak young man to have his head turned by it all; and to propose to some fine lady of rank, who would no more think of marrying him than of marrying her footman."

"I don't think it is likely," said Molly, stoutly. "Roger is too sensible for anything of the kind."

"That's just the fault I always found with him; sensible and cold-hearted! Now, that's a kind of character which may be very valuable, but which revolts me. Give me warmth of heart, even with a little of that extravagance of feeling which misleads the judgment, and conducts into romance. Poor Mr. Kirkpatrick! That was just his character. I used to tell him that his love for me was quite romantic. I think I have told you about his walking five miles in the rain to get me a muffin once when I was ill?"

"Yes!" said Molly. "It was very kind of him."

"So imprudent, too! Just what one of your sensible, cold-hearted, commonplace people would never have thought of doing. With his cough and all."

"I hope he didn't suffer for it?" replied Molly, anxious at any cost to keep off the subject of the Hamleys, upon which she and her stepmother always disagreed, and on which she found it difficult to keep her temper.

"Yes, indeed, he did! I don't think he ever got over the cold he caught that day. I wish you had known him, Molly. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if you had been my real daughter, and Cynthia dear papa's, and Mr. Kirkpatrick and your own dear mother had all lived. People talk a good deal about natural affinities. It would have been a question for a philosopher." She began to think on the impossibilities she had suggested.

"I wonder how the poor little boy is?" said Molly, after a pause, speaking out her thought.

"Poor little child! When one thinks how little his prolonged existence is to be desired, one feels that his death would be a boon."

"Mamma! what do you mean?" asked Molly, much shocked. "Why, every one cares for his life as the most precious thing! You have never seen him! He is the bonniest, sweetest little fellow that can be! What do you mean?"

"I should have thought that the squire would have desired a better-born heir than the offspring of a servant,—with all his ideas about descent and blood and family. And I should have thought that it was a little mortifying to Roger—who must naturally have looked upon himself as his brother's heir—to find a little interloping child, half French, half English, stepping into his shoes!"

"You don't know how fond they are of him,—the squire looks upon him as the apple of his eye."

"Molly! Molly! pray don't let me hear you using such vulgar expressions. When shall I teach you true refinement—that refinement which consists in never even thinking a vulgar, commonplace thing! Proverbs and idioms are never used by people of education. 'Apple of his eye!' I am really shocked."

"Well, mamma, I'm very sorry; but after all, what I wanted to say as strongly as I could was, that the squire loves the little boy as much as his own child; and that Roger—oh! what a shame to think that Roger——" And she stopped suddenly short, as if she were choked.

"I don't wonder at your indignation, my dear!" said Mrs. Gibson. "It is just what I should have felt at your age. But one learns the baseness of human nature with advancing years. I was wrong, though, to undeceive you so early—but depend upon it, the thought I alluded to has crossed Roger Hamley's mind!"

"All sorts of thoughts cross one's mind—it depends upon whether one gives them harbour and encouragement," said Molly.

"My dear, if you must have the last word, don't let it be a truism. But let us talk on some more interesting subject. I asked Cynthia to buy me a silk gown in Paris, and I said I would send her word what colour I fixed upon—I think dark blue is the most becoming to my complexion; what do you say?"

Molly agreed, sooner than take the trouble of thinking about the thing at all; she was far too full of her silent review of all the traits in Roger's character which had lately come under her notice, and that gave the lie direct to her stepmother's supposition. Just

then they heard Mr. Gibson's step downstairs. But it was some time before he made his entrance into the room where they were sitting.

"How is little Roger?" said Molly, eagerly.

"Beginning with scarlet fever, I'm afraid. It's well you left when you did, Molly. You've never had it. We must stop up all intercourse with the Hall for a time. If there's one illness I dread, it is this."

"But you go and come back to us, papa."

"Yes. But I always take plenty of precautions. However, no need to talk about risks that lie in the way of one's duty. It is unnecessary risks that we must avoid."

"Will he have it badly?" asked Molly.

"I can't tell. I shall do my best for the wee laddie."

Whenever Mr. Gibson's feelings were touched, he was apt to recur to the language of his youth. Molly knew now that he was much interested in the case.

For some days there was imminent danger to the little boy; for some weeks there was a more chronic form of illness to contend with; but when the immediate danger was over and the warm daily interest was past, Molly began to realize that, from the strict quarantine her father evidently thought it necessary to establish between the two houses, she was not likely to see Roger again before his departure for Africa. Oh! if she had but made more of the uncared-for days that she had passed with him at the Hall! Worse than uncared for; days on which she had avoided him; refused to converse freely with him; given him pain by her change of manner; for she had read in his eyes, heard in his voice, that he had been perplexed and pained, and now her imagination dwelt on and exaggerated the expression of his tones and looks.

One evening after dinner, her father said,—

"As the country-people say, I've done a stroke of work to-day. Roger Hamley and I have laid our heads together, and we've made a plan by which Mrs. Osborne and her boy will leave the Hall."

"What did I say the other day, Molly?" said Mrs. Gibson, interrupting, and giving Molly a look of extreme intelligence.

"And go into lodgings at Jennings' farm; not four hundred yards from the Park-field gate," continued Mr. Gibson. "The squire and his daughter-in-law have got to be much better friends over the little fellow's sick-bed; and I think he sees now how im-

possible it would be for the mother to leave her child, and go and be happy in France, which has been the notion running in his head all this time. To buy her off, in fact. But that one night, when I was very uncertain whether I could bring him through, they took to crying together, and condoling with each other; and it was just like tearing down a curtain that had been between them; they have been rather friends than otherwise ever since. Still Roger"—(Molly's cheeks grew warm and her eyes soft and bright; it was such a pleasure to hear his name)—"and I both agree that his mother knows much better how to manage the boy than his grandfather does. I suppose that was the one good thing she got from that hard-hearted mistress of hers. She certainly has been well trained in the management of children. And it makes her impatient, and annoyed, and unhappy, when she sees the squire giving the child nuts and ale, and all sorts of silly indulgences, and spoiling him in every possible way. Yet she's a coward, and doesn't speak out her mind. Now by being in lodgings, and having her own servants—nice pretty rooms they are, too; we went to see them, and Mrs. Jennings promises to attend well to Mrs. Osborne Hamley, and is very much honoured, and all that sort of thing—not ten minutes' walk from the Hall, too, so that she and the little chap may easily go backwards and forwards as often as they like, and yet she may keep the control over the child's discipline and diet. In short, I think I've done a good day's work," he continued, stretching himself a little; and then with a shake rousing himself, and making ready to go out again, to see a patient who had sent for him in his absence.

"A good day's work!" he repeated to himself as he ran downstairs. "I don't know when I have been so happy!" For he had not told Molly all that had passed between him and Roger. Roger had begun a fresh subject of conversation just as Mr. Gibson was hastening away from the Hall, after completing the new arrangement for Aimée and her child.

"You know that I set off next Tuesday, Mr. Gibson, don't you?" said Roger, a little abruptly.

"To be sure. I hope you'll be as successful in all your scientific objects as you were the last time, and have no sorrows awaiting you when you come back."

"Thank you. Yes. I hope so. You don't think there's any danger of infection now, do you?"

"No! If the disease were to spread through the household, I think we should have had some signs of it before now. One is never sure, remember, with scarlet fever."

Roger was silent for a minute or two. "Should you be afraid," he said at length, "of seeing me at your house?"

"Thank you; but I think I would rather decline the pleasure of your society there at present. It's only three weeks or a month since the child began. Besides, I shall be over here again before you go. I'm always on my guard against symptoms of dropsy. I have known it supervene."

"Then I shall not see Molly again!" said Roger, in a tone and with a look of great disappointment.

Mr. Gibson turned his keen, observant eyes upon the young man, and looked at him in as penetrating a manner as if he had been beginning with an unknown illness. Then the doctor and the father compressed his lips and gave vent to a long intelligent whistle. "Whew!" said he.

Roger's bronzed cheeks took a deeper shade.

"You will take a message to her from me, won't you? A message of farewell?" he pleaded.

"Not I. I'm not going to be a message-carrier between any young man and young woman. I'll tell my womenkind I forbade you to come near the house, and that you're sorry to go away without bidding good-by. That's all I shall say."

"But you do not disapprove?—I see you guess why. Oh! Mr. Gibson, just speak to me one word of what must be in your heart, though you are pretending not to understand why I would give worlds to see Molly again before I go."

"My dear boy!" said Mr. Gibson, more affected than he liked to show, and laying his hand on Roger's shoulder. Then he pulled himself up, and said gravely enough,—

"Mind, Molly is not Cynthia. If she were to care for you, she is not one who could transfer her love to the next comer."

"You mean not as readily as I have done," replied Roger. "I only wish you could know what a different feeling this is to my boyish love for Cynthia."

"I wasn't thinking of you when I spoke; but, however, as I might have remembered afterwards that you were not a model of constancy, let us hear what you have to say for yourself."

"Not much. I did love Cynthia very much. Her manners and

her beauty bewitched me; but her letters,—short, hurried letters,—sometimes showing that she really hadn't taken the trouble to read mine through,—I cannot tell you the pain they gave me! Twelve months' solitude, in frequent danger of one's life—face to face with death—sometimes ages a man like many years' experience. Still I longed for the time when I should see her sweet face again, and hear her speak. Then the letter at the Cape!—and still I hoped. But you know how I found her, when I went to have the interview which I trusted might end in the renewal of our relations,—engaged to Mr. Henderson. I saw her walking with him in your garden, coquetting with him about a flower, just as she used to do with me. I can see the pitying look in Molly's eyes as she watched me; I can see it now. And I could beat myself for being such a blind fool as to—— What must she think of me? how she must despise me, choosing the false Duessa."

"Come, come! Cynthia isn't so bad as that. She's a very fascinating, faulty creature."

"I know! I know! I will never allow any one to say a word against her. If I called her the false Duessa it was because I wanted to express my sense of the difference between her and Molly as strongly as I could. You must allow for a lover's exaggeration. Besides, all I wanted to say was,—Do you think that Molly, after seeing and knowing that I had loved a person so inferior to herself, could ever be brought to listen to me?"

"I don't know. I can't tell. And even if I could, I wouldn't. Only if it's any comfort to you, I may say what my experience has taught me. Women are queer, unreasoning creatures, and are just as likely as not to love a man who has been throwing away his affection."

"Thank you, sir!" said Roger, interrupting him. "I see you mean to give me encouragement. And I had resolved never to give Molly a hint of what I felt till I returned,—and then to try and win her by every means in my power. I determined not to repeat the former scene in the former place,—in your drawing-room,—however I might be tempted. And perhaps, after all, she avoided me when she was here last."

"Now, Roger, I've listened to you long enough. If you've nothing better to do with your time than to talk about my daughter, I have. When you come back it will be time enough to inquire how far your father would approve of such an engagement."

"He himself urged it upon me the other day—but then I was in despair—I thought it was too late."

"And what means you are likely to have of maintaining a wife,—I always thought that point was passed too lightly over when you formed your hurried engagement to Cynthia. I'm not mercenary,—Molly has some money independently of me,—that she by the way knows nothing of,—not much;—and I can allow her something. But all these things must be left till your return."

"Then you sanction my attachment?"

"I don't know what you mean by sanctioning it. I can't help it. I suppose losing one's daughter is a necessary evil. Still"—seeing the disappointed expression on Roger's face—"it is but fair to you to say I'd rather give my child,—my only child, remember!—to you, than to any man in the world!"

"Thank you!" said Roger, shaking hands with Mr. Gibson, almost against the will of the latter. "And I may see her, just once, before I go?"

"Decidedly not. There I come in as doctor as well as father. No!"

"But you will take a message, at any rate?'

"To my wife and to her conjointly. I will not separate them. I will not in the slightest way be a go-between."

"Very well," said Roger. "Tell them both as strongly as you can how I regret your prohibition. I see I must submit. But if I don't come back, I'll haunt you for having been so cruel."

"Come, I like that. Give me a wise man of science in love! No one beats him in folly. Good-by."

"Good-by. You will see Molly this afternoon!"

"To be sure. And you will see your father. But I don't heave such portentous sighs at the thought."

Mr. Gibson gave Roger's message to his wife and to Molly that evening at dinner. It was but what the latter had expected, after all her father had said of the very great danger of infection; but now that her expectation came in the shape of a final decision, it took away her appetite. She submitted in silence; but her observant father noticed that after this speech of his, she only played with the food on her plate, and concealed a good deal of it under her knife and fork.

"Lover *versus* father!" thought he, half sadly. "Lover wins." And he, too, became indifferent to all that remained of his dinner Mrs. Gibson pattered on; and nobody listened.

The day of Roger's departure came. Molly tried hard to forget it in working away at a cushion she was preparing as a present to Cynthia; people did worsted-work in those days. One, two, three. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven; all wrong: she was thinking of something else, and had to unpick it. It was a rainy day, too; and Mrs. Gibson, who had planned to go out and pay some calls, had to stay indoors. This made her restless and fidgety. She kept going backwards and forwards to different windows in the drawing-room to look at the weather, as if she imagined that while it rained at one window, it might be fine weather at another. "Molly—come here! who is that man wrapped up in a cloak,—there,—near the Park wall, under the beech-tree—he has been there this half-hour and more, never stirring, and looking at this house all the time! I think it's very suspicious."

Molly looked, and in an instant recognized Roger under all his wraps. Her first instinct was to draw back. The next to come forwards, and say—"Why, mamma, it's Roger Hamley! Look now—he's kissing his hand; he's wishing us good-by in the only way he can!" And she responded to his sign; but she was not sure if he perceived her modest quiet movement, for Mrs. Gibson became immediately so demonstrative that Molly fancied that her eager foolish pantomimic motions must absorb all his attention.

"I call this so attentive of him," said Mrs. Gibson, in the midst of a volley of kisses of her hand. "Really it is quite romantic. It reminds me of former days—but he will be too late! I must send him away; it is half-past twelve!" And she took out her watch and held it up, tapping it with her fore-finger, and occupying the very centre of the window. Molly could only peep here and there, dodging now up, now down, now on this side, now on that of the perpetually-moving arms. She fancied she saw something of a corresponding movement on Roger's part. At length he went away slowly, slowly, and often looking back, in spite of the tapped watch. Mrs. Gibson at last retreated, and Molly quietly moved into her place to see his figure once more before the turn of the road hid it from her view. He, too, knew where the last glimpse of Mr. Gibson's house was to be obtained, and once more he turned, and his white handkerchief floated in the air. Molly waved hers high up, with eager longing that it should be seen. And then, he was gone! and Molly returned to her worsted-work, happy, glowing, sad, content, and thinking to herself how sweet is friendship!

When she came to a sense of the present, Mrs. Gibson was saying,—

"Upon my word, though Roger Hamley has never been a great favourite of mine, this little attention of his has reminded me very forcibly of a very charming young man—a *soupirant*, as the French would call him—Lieutenant Harper—you must have heard me speak of him, Molly?"

"I think I have!" said Molly, absently.

"Well, you remember how devoted he was to me when I was at Mrs. Duncombe's, my first situation, and I only seventeen. And when the recruiting party was ordered to another town, poor Mr. Harper came and stood opposite the schoolroom window for nearly an hour, and I know it was his doing that the band played 'The girl I left behind me,' when they marched out the next day. Poor Mr. Harper! It was before I knew dear Mr. Kirkpatrick! Dear me. How often my poor heart has had to bleed in this life of mine! not but what dear papa is a very worthy man, and makes me very happy. He would spoil me, indeed, if I would let him. Still he is not as rich as Mr. Henderson."

That last sentence contained the germ of Mrs. Gibson's present grievance. Having married Cynthia, as her mother put it—taking credit to herself as if she had had the principal part in the achievement—she now became a little envious of her daughter's good fortune in being the wife of a young, handsome, rich, and moderately fashionable man, who lived in London. She naïvely expressed her feelings on this subject to her husband one day when she was really not feeling quite well, and when consequently her annoyances were much more present to her mind than her sources of happiness.

"It is such a pity!" said she, "that I was born when I was. I should so have liked to belong to this generation."

"That's sometimes my own feeling," said he. "So many new views seem to be opened in science, that I should like, if it were possible, to live till their reality was ascertained, and one saw what they led to. But I don't suppose that's your reason, my dear, for wishing to be twenty or thirty years younger."

"No, indeed. And I did not put it in that hard unpleasant way; I only said I should like to belong to this generation. To tell the truth, I was thinking of Cynthia. Without vanity, I believe I was as pretty as she is—when I was a girl, I mean; I had not her dark eyelashes, but then my nose was straighter. And now look at

the difference! I have to live in a little country town with three servants, and no carriage; and she with her inferior good looks will live in Sussex Place, and keep a man and a brougham, and I don't know what. But the fact is, in this generation there are so many more rich young men than there were when I was a girl."

"Oh, oh! so that's your reason, is it, my dear? If you had been young now you might have married somebody as well off as Walter?"

"Yes!" said she. "I think that was my idea. Of course I should have liked him to be you. I always think if you had gone to the bar you might have succeeded better, and lived in London, too. I don't think Cynthia cares much where she lives, yet you see it has come to her."

"What has—London?"

"Oh, you dear, facetious man. Now that's just the thing to have captivated a jury. I don't believe Walter will ever be so clever as you are. Yet he can take Cynthia to Paris, and abroad, and everywhere. I only hope all this indulgence won't develope the faults in Cynthia's character. It's a week since we heard from her, and I did write so particularly to ask her for the autumn fashions before I bought my new bonnet. But riches are a great snare."

"Be thankful you are spared temptation, my dear."

"No, I'm not. Everybody likes to be tempted. And, after all, it's very easy to resist temptation, if one wishes."

"I don't find it so easy," said her husband.

"Here's medicine for you, mamma," said Molly, entering with a letter held up in her hand. "A letter from Cynthia."

"Oh, you dear little messenger of good news! There was one of the heathen deities in Mangnall's Questions whose office it was to bring news. The letter is dated from Calais. They're coming home! She's bought me a shawl and a bonnet! The dear creature! Always thinking of others before herself: good fortune cannot spoil her. They've a fortnight left of their holiday! Their house is not quite ready; they're coming here. Oh, now, Mr. Gibson, we must have the new dinner-service at Watts's I've set my heart on so long! 'Home' Cynthia calls this house. I'm sure it has been a home to her, poor darling! I doubt if there is another man in the world who would have treated his step-daughter like dear papa! And, Molly, you must have a new gown."

"Come, come! Remember I belong to the last generation," said Mr. Gibson.

"And Cynthia won't mind what I wear," said Molly, bright with pleasure at the thought of seeing her again.

"No! but Walter will. He has such a quick eye for dress, and I think I rival papa; if he is a good stepfather, I'm a good stepmother, and I could not bear to see my Molly shabby, and not looking her best. I must have a new gown too. It won't do to look as if we had nothing but the dresses which we wore at the wedding!"

But Molly stood out against the new gown for herself, and urged that if Cynthia and Walter were to come to visit them often, they had better see them as they really were, in dress, habits, and appointments. When Mr. Gibson had left the room, Mrs. Gibson softly reproached Molly for her obstinacy.

"You might have allowed me to beg for a new gown for you, Molly, when you knew how much I admired that figured silk at Brown's the other day. And now, of course, I can't be so selfish as to get it for myself, and you to have nothing. You should learn to understand the wishes of other people. Still, on the whole, you are a dear, sweet girl, and I only wish—well, I know what I wish; only dear papa does not like it to be talked about. And now cover me up close, and let me go to sleep, and dream about my dear Cynthia and my new shawl!"

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CONCLUDING REMARKS:

[*By the* Editor *of* The Cornhill Magazine.]

Here the story is broken off, and it can never be finished. What promised to be the crowning work of a life is a memorial of death. A few days longer, and it would have been a triumphal column, crowned with a capital of festal leaves and flowers: now it is another sort of column—one of those sad white pillars which stand broken in the churchyard.

But if the work is not quite complete, little remains to be added to it, and that little has been distinctly reflected into our minds. We know that Roger Hamley will marry Molly, and that is what we are most concerned about. Indeed, there was little else to tell. Had the writer lived, she would have sent her hero back to Africa forthwith; and those scientific parts of Africa are a long way from Hamley; and there is not much to choose between a long distance and a long time. How many hours are there in twenty-four when you are all alone in a desert place, a thousand miles from the happiness which might be yours to take—if you were there to take it? How many, when from the sources of the Topinambo your heart flies back ten times a day, like a carrier-pigeon, to the one only source of future good for you, and ten times a day returns with its message undelivered? Many more than are counted on the calendar. So Roger found. The days were weeks that separated him from the time when Molly gave him a certain little flower, and months from the time which divorced him from Cynthia, whom he had begun to doubt before he knew for certain that she was never much worth hoping for. And if such were his days, what was the slow procession of actual weeks and months in those remote and solitary places? They were like years of a stay-at-home life, with liberty and leisure to see that nobody was courting Molly meanwhile. The effect of this was, that long before the term of his engagement was ended all that Cynthia had been to him was departed from Roger's mind, and all that Molly was and might be to him filled it full.

He returned; but when he saw Molly again he remembered that to her the time of his absence might not have seemed so long, and was oppressed with the old dread that she would think him fickle.

Therefore this young gentleman, so self-reliant and so lucid in scientific matters, found it difficult after all to tell Molly how much he hoped she loved him ; and might have blundered if he had not thought of beginning by showing her the flower that was plucked from the nosegay. How charmingly that scene would have been drawn, had Mrs. Gaskell lived to depict it, we can only imagine : that it *would* have been charming—especially in what Molly did, and looked, and said—we know.

Roger and Molly are married ; and if one of them is happier than the other, it is Molly. Her husband has no need to draw upon the little fortune which is to go to poor Osborne's boy, for he becomes professor at some great scientific institution, and wins his way in the world handsomely. The squire is almost as happy in this marriage as his son. If any one suffers for it, it is Mr. Gibson. But he takes a partner, so as to get a chance of running up to London to stay with Molly for a few days now and then, and "to get a little rest from Mrs. Gibson." Of what was to happen to Cynthia after her marriage the author was not heard to say much ; and, indeed, it does not seem that anything needs to be added. One little anecdote, however, was told of her by Mrs. Gaskell, which is very characteristic. One day, when Cynthia and her husband were on a visit to Hollingford, Mr. Henderson learned for the first time, through an innocent casual remark of Mr. Gibson's, that the famous traveller, Roger Hamley, was known to the family. Cynthia had never happened to mention it. How well that little incident, too, would have been described !

But it is useless to speculate upon what would have been done by the delicate strong hand which can create no more Molly Gibsons —no more Roger Hamleys. We have repeated, in this brief note, all that is known of her designs for the story, which would have been completed in another chapter. There is not so much to regret, then, so far as this novel is concerned ; indeed, the regrets of those who knew her are less for the loss of the novelist than of the woman —one of the kindest and wisest of her time. But yet, for her own sake *as* a novelist alone, her untimely death is a matter for deep regret. It is clear in this novel of *Wives and Daughters*, in the exquisite little story that preceded it, *Cousin Phillis*, and in *Sylvia's Lovers*, that Mrs. Gaskell had within these five years started upon a new career with all the freshness of youth, and with a mind which seemed to have put off its clay and to have been born again. But

that "put off its clay" must be taken in a very narrow sense. All minds are tinctured more or less with the "muddy vesture" in which they are contained; but few minds ever showed less of base earth than Mrs. Gaskell's. It was so at all times; but lately even the original slight tincture seemed to disappear. While you read any one of the last three books we have named, you feel yourself caught out of an abominable wicked world, crawling with selfishness and reeking with base passions, into one where there is much weakness, many mistakes, sufferings long and bitter, but where it is possible for people to live calm and wholesome lives; and, what is more, you feel that this is at least as real a world as the other. The kindly spirit which thinks no ill looks out of her pages irradiate; and while we read them, we breathe the purer intelligence which prefers to deal with emotions and passions which have a living root in minds within the pale of salvation, and not with those which rot without it. This spirit is more especially declared in *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*—their author's latest works; they seem to show that for her the end of life was not descent amongst the clods of the valley, but ascent into the purer air of the heaven-aspiring hills.

We are saying nothing now of the merely intellectual qualities displayed in these later works. Twenty years to come, that may be thought the more important question of the two; in the presence of her grave we cannot think so; but it is true, all the same, that as mere works of art and observation, these later novels of Mrs. Gaskell's are among the finest of our time. There is a scene in *Cousin Phillis* —where Holman, making hay with his men, ends the day with a psalm—which is not excelled as a picture in all modern fiction; and the same may be said of that chapter of this last story in which Roger smokes a pipe with the Squire after the quarrel with Osborne. There is little in either of these scenes, or in a score of others which succeed each other like gems in a cabinet, which the ordinary novel-maker could "seize." There is no "material" for *him* in half-a-dozen farming men singing hymns in a field, or a discontented old gentleman smoking tobacco with his son. Still less could he avail himself of the miseries of a little girl sent to be happy in a fine house full of fine people; but it is just in such things as these that true genius appears brightest and most unapproachable. It is the same with the personages in Mrs. Gaskell's works. Cynthia is one of the most difficult characters which have ever been attempted in our

time. Perfect art always obscures the difficulties it overcomes; and it is not till we try to follow the processes by which such a character as the Tito of *Romola* is created, for instance, that we begin to understand what a marvellous piece of work it is. To be sure, Cynthia was not so difficult, nor is it nearly so great a creation as that splendid achievement of art and thought—of the rarest art, of the profoundest thought. But she also belongs to the kind of characters which are conceived only in minds large, clear, harmonious and just, and which can be portrayed fully and without flaw only by hands obedient to the finest motions of the mind. Viewed in this light, Cynthia is a more important piece of work even than Molly, delicately as she is drawn, and true and harmonious as that picture is also. And what we have said of Cynthia may be said with equal truth of Osborne Hamley. The true delineation of a character like that is as fine a test of art as the painting of a foot or a hand, which also seems so easy, and in which perfection is most rare. In this case the work is perfect. Mrs. Gaskell has drawn a dozen characters more striking than Osborne since she wrote *Mary Barton*, but not one which shows more exquisite finish.

Another thing we may be permitted to notice, because it has a great and general significance. It may be true that this is not exactly the place for criticism, but since we are writing of Osborne Hamley, we cannot resist pointing out a peculiar instance of the subtler conceptions which underlie all really considerable works. Here are Osborne and Roger, two men who, in every particular that can be seized for *description*, are totally different creatures. Body and mind they are quite unlike. They have different tastes; they take different ways: they are men of two sorts which, in the society sense, never "know" each other; and yet, never did brotherly blood run more manifest than in the veins of those two. To make that manifest without allowing the effort to peep out for a single moment, would be a triumph of art; but it is a "touch beyond the reach of art" to make their likeness in unlikeness so natural a thing that we no more wonder about it than we wonder at seeing the fruit and the bloom on the same bramble: we have always seen them there together in blackberry season, and do not wonder about it nor think about it at all. Inferior writers, even some writers who are highly accounted, would have revelled in the "contrast," persuaded that they were doing a fine anatomical dramatic thing by bringing it out at every opportunity. To the author of *Wives and Daughters* this

sort of anatomy was mere dislocation. She began by having the people of her story born in the usual way, and not built up like the Frankenstein monster; and thus when Squire Hamley took a wife, it was then provided that his two boys should be as naturally one and diverse as the fruit and the bloom on the bramble. "It goes without speaking." These differences are precisely what might have been expected from the union of Squire Hamley with the town-bred, refined, delicate-minded woman whom he married; and the affection of the young men, their kindness (to use the word in its old and new meanings at once) is nothing but a reproduction of those impalpable threads of love which bound the equally diverse father and mother in bonds faster than the ties of blood.

But we will not permit ourselves to write any more in this vein. It is unnecessary to demonstrate to those who know what is and what is not true literature that Mrs. Gaskell was gifted with some of the choicest faculties bestowed upon mankind; that these grew into greater strength and ripened into greater beauty in the decline of her days; and that she has gifted us with some of the truest, purest works of fiction in the language. And she was herself what her works show her to have been—a wise, good woman.

THE END.

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